CATECHISM

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The word 'catechism' may be translated from the Greek as 'oral exhortation'. From apostolic times this was the name given to the teaching of the truths of the Christian faith, and which preceded baptism, the act of entry into the life of the Church. The catechical exhortations of St. Cyril of Jerusalem (fourth century) are a monument to early Church catechism.

Catechism in book form arose in the Middle Ages and contained a short exposition of the basics of Christian dogma and morality. This type of catechism was intended more as a refreshment of the memory than as an object of study. At present not only those who are entering the Church for the first time, but many Orthodox Christians too have no opportuniy of receiving the necessary religious education. Subsequently, traditional catechisms (such as that of Metropolitan Philaret Drozdov), rooted in the scholastic approach and consisting of a systematic exposition of already taught material, could not be used in the preparation of the on-line version. Therefore the following was chosen for the preparation of an on-line catechism: *THE MYSTERY OF FAITH: An Introduction to Orthodox Dogma and Spirituality,* by Hieromonk *Hilarion Alfeyev*.

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DOGMA AND SPIRITUALITY

In the modern world there is the widely held view that religious dogmas are not obligatory but secondary: even if they still have a certain historical value, they are no longer vital for Christians. Moral and social agendas have become the main concern of many Christian communities, while theological issues are often neglected. The dissociation of dogma and morality, however, contradicts the very nature of religious life, which presupposes that faith should always be confirmed by deeds, and vice versa. Emphasizing this, St James said: ‘Faith apart from works is dead’ (James 2:26). St Paul, on the other hand, claimed that ‘a man is justified by faith apart from works of law’ (Rom.3:28). Under the ‘works of law’ he meant the Old Testament rites and sacrifices which were no longer necessary after Christ’s sacrifice for the life of the world, Good deeds are necessary and essential, yet when separated from faith they do not in themselves save the human person: one is justified by faith, but a faith which is accompanied by moral life.

No less alien to Christianity is the dissociation of dogma and mysticism, or doctrine and spirituality, or theology and spiritual life. There is an essential interdependence between dogma and mysticism: they are inseparable and both, in different ways, lead one to the knowledge of truth. ‘And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free’, says the Lord (John 8:32), Who Himself is the only Truth, the Way and the Life (John 14:6). Each dogma reveals truth, opens up the way and communicates life.

Theology ought not to contradict religious experience but on the contrary proceed from it. This has been the theology of the Fathers of the Church for twenty centuries - from St Paul and St Ignatius of Antioch to St Theophanes the Recluse and St Silouan of Mount Athos.

Founded on spiritual experience and not being a part of rationalism and scholasticism, Orthodox theology is a living entity in our day no less than hundreds of years ago. The same questions have always confronted the human person: What is truth? What is the meaning of life? How can one find joy and peace of heart? What is the way to salvation? Christianity does not aim to dot all the ‘i’s by answering all the questions the human spirit has to ask. But it does open up another reality, which transcends all that surrounds us in this earthly life. Once this reality is encountered, the human person leaves behind all his questions and bewilderment, because his soul has come into contact with the Divinity and falls silent in the presence of the Mystery, which no human word can convey.

WHAT IS FAITH?

Faith is the path along which God and the human person encounter each other. It is God who makes the first step: He fully and unconditionally believes in the human person and gives him a sign, an awareness of His presence. We hear the mysterious call of God, and our first step towards an encounter with Him is a response to this call. God

may call us openly or in secret, overtly or covertly. But it is difficult for us to believe in Him if we do not first heed this call.

Faith is both a mystery and a miracle. Why does one person respond to the call while another not? Having heard the word of God, why is one open to receive it, yet the other remains deaf? Why, having encountered God on his path does the one immediately abandon everything and follow Him, but the other turn away and take a different road? 'As He walked by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother; for they were fishermen. And He said to them, "Follow Me"... Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. And going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John... and He called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him (Matt.4:18-22).

What secret lays behind the readiness of the Galilean fishermen to abandon everything and follow a Man that they had met for the first time? On the other hand, why did the rich young man, to whom Christ also said 'Come and follow Me', not respond at once but instead 'went away sorrowful' (Matt.19:21-22)? Is it not because the fishermen were poor, while the young man 'had great possessions'? Is it not because the former had nothing other than God, while the latter had 'treasure on earth'?

Each one of us has treasure on earth, whether it be in the form of money or possessions, satisfactory employment or material well being. But the Lord said, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matt.5:3). In St Luke's Gospel this is put even more simply and directly: 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Luke 6:20). Blessed are they who realize that while they may possess many things, they in fact own nothing. Blessed are they who realize that no earthly acquisition can substitute for God. Blessed are they who go and sell all their wealth in order to acquire the pearl of great price (cf. Matt.13:45-46). Blessed are they who know that without God they are poor, who have thirsted and hungered after Him with all their soul, mind and will.

THE CALL

It has never been easy to hear the message of faith. In our day we are so engrossed in the problems of earthly existence that we simply have no time to listen to this message and to reflect on God. For some, religion has been reduced to celebrating Christmas and Easter and to observing a few traditions for fear of being 'torn away from our roots'. Others do not go to church at all because they are 'too busy'. 'He is engrossed in his work'; 'work is everything to him'; and 'he is a busy man' are the best compliments that one can receive from friends and colleagues. 'Business people' are a breed peculiar to the twentieth century. Nothing exists for them other than a preoccupation, which swallows them up completely leaving no place for that silence where the voice of God may be heard.

And yet, however paradoxical it may seem, in spite of today's noise and confusion, we can still hear the mysterious call of God in our hearts. Now this call may not always be understood as the voice of God. It may strike us as a feeling of dissatisfaction or of inner unease, as a search. For many, it is only after the passing of years that they realize their life was incomplete and inadequate because it was without

God. 'You have made us for yourself', says St Augustine, 'and our heart is restless until it rests in You'. Without God there can never be the fulness of being. It is therefore crucially important for us to be able to hear and to respond to the voice of God at the very moment when God is speaking; not years later. If the call of God is identified by someone and he responds to it, this may change and transfigure his whole life.

CONVERSION TO GOD

Throughout the ages, people have come to God by diverse ways. Sometimes the encounter with Him is sudden and unexpected, sometimes it is prepared by circuitous paths of searching, doubts and disillusion. Occasionally God 'closes in' on us, catching us unawares, while at other times we discover God and turn to Him on our own. This conversion may occur sooner or later, in childhood or in youth, in adulthood or in old age. And there are no two people who have come to God along identical paths. There is no way that has been followed by more than one seeker. I am a unique traveller; I must take my own road, to discover a personal God, to Whom I can say, 'O God, Thou art my God!' (Ps.63:6) God is one and the same for all people, but He must be discovered by me and become mine.

Conversion to God is always both a miracle and a gift, whether or not it is sudden and unexpected. Often a person seeks for a long time before finding God; yet it is not the individual who discovers God but rather God who captures him. However, there may well exist a certain interdependence between the endeavours and zeal of the seeker and the object of the search, the encounter with God. St Augustine, for example, passed through many trials in the search for truth; read many philosophical and theological books before coming to understand, in his thirty-third year, that he could not live without God. In modern times some people begin their search for an abstract 'truth' through books before coming to a revelation of the Personal God.

Some have come to Christianity in a roundabout way, through Eastern religions and cults, Buddhism and Yoga. Others have come to God after experiencing a catastrophe: the loss of close person, an illness, a sudden collapse of lifelong expectations. In misfortune we feel our poverty very markedly, through the realization that we have has lost everything and have nothing else or nobody other than God. It is only then that we find ourselves crying to God de profundis, out of the depths (Ps.130:1), from the abyss of profound grief and despair.

Conversion to God may happen result from the encounter with a true believer, perhaps a priest or a devout layperson.

There is, finally, what appears to be the most natural way in reaching God: a child born into a religious family who is raised as a believer. But here, too, this faith, received as a legacy from his forefathers, must be thought through and suffered by the person himself; it has to become a part of his own experience. There are many instances of people from religious families who broke with the faith of their ancestors and became atheists: the miraculous encounter with God did not occur. How this happened, we do not always know. What we do know is that nobody is born a believer. Faith is a gift, though in many cases it is given though the efforts and endeavours of the one who has sought it.

PHILOSOPHY IN SEARCH OF A SUPREME GOD

For as long as humans have lived on earth they have always striven to find truth, to find meaning to their existence. In Ancient Greece the philosophers studied the universe and its laws; they investigated human nature and human reason, hoping to discover knowledge of the first causes of all things. The philosophers not only engaged in rational debate and logic, they also studied astronomy and physics, mathematics and geometry, music and poetry. Versatile knowledge was in many cases combined with an ascetic life and prayer, without which it was impossible to obtain a katharsis, a purification of mind, soul and body.

In studying the visible world, philosophers came to the conclusion that there was nothing accidental in the universe, that every detail has its place and fulfils its role by being subject to strict laws: the planets never go out of orbit and the satellites never abandon their planets. Everything in the world is so harmonious and meaningful that the ancients called it the 'cosmos', that is, 'beauty', 'order', 'harmony', as opposed to 'chaos' - 'disorder', 'disharmony'. For them the cosmos is a huge mechanism in which a single unbreakable rhythm is at work, a single regular pulse. But each mechanism must have been created by someone; every watch needs to have been constructed and sprung. Thus by dialectical means the philosophers arrived at the idea of a single Author of the Universe. Plato called Him the Creator, Father, God and Demiurge (Maker or Craftsman).

The Greek philosophers also spoke about the Logos (meaning 'word', 'reason', 'idea', 'law'), which was originally perceived as an eternal and general law upon which the whole world is constructed. However, the Logos is not only an abstract idea: it is also a divine creative force mediating between God and the created world. This was the teaching of Philo of Alexandria and the Neoplatonists.

Plotinus, a representative of the Neoplatonist school, emphasizes the transcendence, infiniteness, limitlessness and incomprehensibility of the Divinity: no definitions can exhaust it, no attributes can be ascribed to it. In being the fulness of Being, the One engenders all other forms of being, of which the first is the Intelligence and the second the Soul. Beyond the confines of the circle of the Soul lies the material world, that is, the universe, into which the Soul breathes life. Thus the world is a kind of reflection of the divine reality and bears within itself the marks of beauty and perfection. The One, the Intelligence and the Soul comprise in total a Divine Triad (Trinity). Through purification (katharsis) the human person can be elevated to the contemplation of God. However, the One still remains incomprehensible and inaccessible, He still remains a mystery.

With the examples of Plato and Plotinus we can see that the Greek philosophy comes very close to the truths that are to be finally revealed in Christianity: the one God, the Creator of the world, the divine Logos, the Holy Trinity, the vision of God, the deification of the human person. This is why early Christian writers called the philosophers 'Christians before Christ'.

THE RELIGION OF REVELATION

The majority of peoples in the pre-Christian world followed various polytheistic beliefs and cults.

However, there was one chosen people whom God entrusted with knowledge of Himself, of the creation of the world, and of the meaning of existence. The ancient Jews knew God not from books, not from the deliberations of wise men, but from their own age-old experience. Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Elijah, and the many righteous men and women of Israel did not simply contemplate God and pray to Him - they saw Him with their own eyes, conversed with Him face to face, 'walked' before Him.

Each of God's revelations in the Old Testament bear a personal nature. God is revealed to humanity not as an abstract force, but as a living Being, Who can speak, hear, see, think and help. God takes a vital and active part in the life of the Israelites. When Moses leads the people out of Egypt into the Promised Land, God Himself goes ahead of them in the form of a column of fire. God abides among the people, converses with them and lives in the house that they built for Him. When King Solomon completed the building of the Temple, he called upon God to live there. God, Who abides in darkness, Who is surrounded by great mystery, Whom heaven and earth, that is, the visible and invisible world, cannot contain, comes down to people and lives where they want Him to live, where they have set aside a place for Him.

This is the most striking thing about the religion of revelation: God remains under the veil of a mystery, remains unknown and yet at the same time He is so close to people that they can call Him 'our God' and 'my God'. It is here that we encounter the gulf between Divine revelation and the achievements of human thought: the God of the philosophers remains abstract and lifeless, whereas the God of revelation is a living, close and personal God. Both ways lead us to understand that God is incomprehensible and that He is a mystery; yet philosophy abandons the person at the foothills of the mountain, forbidding him to ascend further, whereas religion leads him up to the heights where God abides in darkness, it draws him into the cloud of unknowing where beyond all words and rational deductions it opens up before him the mystery of God.

ETYMOLOGY OF THE WORD "GOD"

In any language the word used to designate 'God' is related to different terms and concepts. The peoples of antiquity attempted to find in their languages a word to express their notion of God or, rather, their experience of encounter with the Divinity.

In the languages of Germanic origin the word God (German Gott) comes from a verb meaning 'to fall to the ground', to fall in worship. This reflects an experience similar to that of St Paul, who, when illumined by God on the road to Damascus, was struck by divine light and immediately 'fell to the ground... in fear and trembling' (Acts 9:4-6).

In the Slavic languages the word Bog ('God') is related to the Sanskrit bhaga, which means 'dispensing gifts', 'endowing', which in its turn comes from bhagas, meaning 'inheritance', 'happiness', 'wealth'. The Slavonic word bogatstvo ('riches', 'wealth') is also related to the Russian word for 'God', Bog. Here we find God expressed in terms of the fulness of being, perfection and bliss. These properties, however, do not

remain within God, but are poured out onto the world, onto people and onto all living things. God dispenses the gift of His plenitude and endows us with His riches, when we turn to Him.

According to Plato, the Greek word Theos ('God') originates from the verb theein, meaning 'to run'. St Gregory the Theologian identifies a second etymology beside the one of Plato: he claims that the name Theos comes from the verb ethein, meaning 'to be set alight', 'to burn', 'to be aflame'. St Basil the Great offers two more etymologies: 'God is called Theos either because He placed (tetheikenai) all things, or because He beholds (theasthai) all things'.

The Name by which God revealed Himself to the ancient Israelites was Yahweh, meaning 'The One Who Is', The One Who has existence and being. It derives from the verb hayah, meaning 'to be', 'to exist', or rather from the first person of this verb, ehieh - 'I am'. This verb has a dynamic meaning: it does not simply denote the fact of existence, but signifies a certain actual being, a living and actual presence. When God tells Moses 'I am who I am' (Ex.3:14), this means 'I live, I am here, I am together with you'. At the same time this name emphasizes the superiority of God's being over all other beings. He is the independent, primary, eternal being, the plenitude of being which is above being.

Ancient tradition tells us that out of reverential awe the Jews in the period after the Babylonian captivity never pronounced the name Yahweh, the One Who Is. Only the high priest could pronounce this name, and this once a year, when he went into the Holy of Holies, on the day of Yom Kippur to offer incense. If a simple person or even a priest wanted to say something about God, he substituted other names for Yahweh, usually the name of Adonai (the Lord). In script the Jews indicated the word 'God' by the sacred tetragrammaton YHWH. The ancient Jews knew well that there was no name, word or term in human language that could convey the essence of God. In refraining from pronouncing the name of God, the Jews showed that it is possible to be at one with God not so much through words and descriptions, but through a reverential and trembling silence.

THE DIVINE NAMES

'How can we speak of the Divine names? How can we do this if the Transcendent surpasses all discourse and all knowledge?... How can we enter upon this undertaking if the Godhead is superior to being and is unspeakable and unnameable?', says Dionysius the Areopagite. At the same time, God, being totally transcendent, is present in the created world and revealed through it. All creation longs for God, and more especially, we humans crave for knowledge of Him. Therefore God is to be praised both 'by every name' and 'as the Nameless One'. Nameless in His essence, God is variously named by humanity when He reveals Himself to us.

Some of the names attributed to God emphasize His superiority over the visible world; His power, dominion and kingly dignity. The name Lord (Greek, Kyrios) signifies the supreme dominion of God not only over His chosen people, but also over the whole world. The name of Almighty (Greek, Pantokrator) signifies that God holds all things in His hand; He upholds the world and its order.

The names Holy, 'Holy Place', Holiness, Sanctification, Good and Goodness indicate that God not only contains within Himself the whole plenitude of goodness and holiness, but He also pours out this goodness onto all of His creatures, sanctifying them.

In Holy Scripture there are other attributions to God: Wisdom, Truth, Light, Life, Salvation, Atonement, Deliverance, Resurrection, Righteousness, Love. There are in Scripture a number of names for God taken from nature. These do not attempt to define either His characteristics or His attributes, but are rather symbols and analogies. God is compared with the sun, the stars, fire, wind, water, dew, cloud, stone, cliff and fragrance. Christ Himself is spoken of as Shepherd, Lamb, Way, Door. All of these epithets, simple and concrete, are borrowed from everyday reality and life. But, as in Christ's parables of the pearl, tree, leaven and seeds, we discern ahidden meaning that is infinitely greater and more significant.

Holy Scripture speaks of God as a being with human form having a face, eyes, ears, hands, shoulders, wings, legs and breath. It is said that God turns around and turns away, recollects and forgets, becomes angry and calms down, is surprised, sorrows, hates, walks and hears. Fundamental to this anthropomorphism is the experience of a personal encounter with God as a living being. In order to express this experience we have come to use earthly words and images.

"FATHER" AS A DIVINE NAME

'Father' is the traditional, biblical name for God. His children are the people of Israel: 'For Thou art our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; Thou, O Lord art our Father, our Redeemer from of old is Thy name' (Is.63:16). The fatherhood of God is, of course, not a matter of maleness for there is no gender in the Divinity. It is important to remember, however, that the name 'Father' was not simply applied by humans to the Divinity: it is the very name with which God opened Himself to the people of Israel. Male imagery was not therefore imposed on God, rather God Himself chose it in His revelation to humans (cf. 2 Sam.7:14; 1 Chron.17:13; Jer.3:19; 31:9). The three Persons of the Holy Trinity bear the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit, where the name Son belongs to the eternal Logos of God, Who was incarnate and became man. In Semitic languages where the word for Spirit (Hebrew ruah, Syriac ruha') is feminine, female imagery is applied to the Holy Spirit. Both the Hebrew and the Greek terms for the Wisdom of God (Hebrew hokh'ma, Greek sophia) are feminine: this opens the possibility of applying female imagery to the Son of God, Who is traditionally identified with the Wisdom. With this exception, for both Father and Son exclusively male imagery is used in the Eastern tradition.

The Orthodox normally oppose modern attempts to change traditional biblical imagery by making God-language more 'inclusive' and referring to God as 'mother', and to His Son as 'daughter', or using the generic terms 'parent' and 'child'. For the Orthodox, the full understanding of motherhood is embodied in the person of the Mother of God, whose veneration is not merely a custom or cultural phenomenon, but a church dogma and an essential part of spirituality. It is therefore not a matter of cultural difference between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholics on the one hand, and the

Protestants on the other, that the former venerate the Mother of God, while the latter pray to 'God the Mother'. It is a serious dogmatic difference. Moreover, it is not simply stubborness on the part of the Orthodox when they reject changing biblical God-language, but rather a clear understanding of the fact that the entire spiritual, theological and mystical tradition of the Church undergoes irrecoverable alterations when the traditional set of the divine names and images is changed.

Indeed, any name can be applied to the Divinity, while none can describe it. All names used for God in biblical and Orthodox traditions are aimed at grasping the mystery which is beyond names. Nevertheless, it is crucially important to remain with biblical God-language and not replace it with innovative forms. All names for God are anthropomorphic. Yet there is a difference between biblical anthropomorphism, which is based on the experience of the personal God in His revelation to humans, and the pseudo-anthropomorphism of modern theologians who, by introducing the notion of gender into the Divinity, speak of God as 'He-She', or 'Our Mother and Father'.

CATAPHATIC AND APOPHATIC THEOLOGY

When discussing the names of God, we inevitably conclude that not one of them can give us a complete idea of who He is. To speak of the attributes of God is to discover that their sum total is not God. God transcends any name. If we call Him being, He transcends being, He is supra-being. If we ascribe to Him righteousness and justice, in His love He transcends all justice. If we call Him love, He is much more than human love: He is supra-love. God transcends all attributes that we are capable of ascribing to Him, be it omniscience, omnipresence or immutability. Ultimately we arrive at the conclusion that we can say nothing about God affirmatively: all discussion about Him remains incomplete, partial and limited. Finally we come to realize that we cannot say what God is, but rather what He is not. This manner of speaking about God has received the name of apophatic (negative) theology, as opposed to cataphatic (affirmative) theology.

The traditional image of Moses ascending Mount Sinai to God, surrounded in darkness, inspired both St Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite to speak about the divine darkness as a symbol of God's incomprehensibility. To enter the divine darkness is to go beyond the confines of being as understood by the intellect. Moses encountered God but the Israelites remained at the foot of the mountain, that is, within the confines of a cataphatic knowledge of God. Only Moses could enter the darkness; having separated himself from all things, he could encounter God, Who is outside of everything, Who is there where there is nothing. Cataphatically we can say that God is Light, but in doing so we liken God to sensible light. And if it is said about Christ transfigured on Mount Tabor that 'his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light' (Matt.17:2), then the cataphatic notion of 'light' is used here symbolically, since this is the uncreated light of the Divinity that transcends all human concepts of light. Apophatically we can call the Divine light, the supra-light or darkness. Thus the darkness of Sinai and the light of Tabor are one and the same.

In our understanding of God we often rely upon cataphatic notions since these are easier and more accessible to the mind. But cataphatic knowledge has its limits. The way

of negation corresponds to the spiritual ascent into the Divine abyss where words fall silent, where reason fades, where all human knowledge and comprehension cease, where God is. It is not by speculative knowledge but in the depths of prayerful silence that the soul can encounter God, Who is 'beyond everything' and Who reveals Himself to her as in-comprehensible, in-accessible, in-visible, yet at the same time as living and close to her - as God the Person.

THE MYSTERY OF THE TRINITY

Christians believe in God the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is not three gods, but one God in three Hypostases, in three personal beings. What mathematics and logic consider an absurdity constitutes the cornerstone of our faith, namely that 1=3 and 3=1. Christians participate in the trinitarian Godhead not through logic but through repentance, that is, through a complete change and renewal of the mind, heart and feelings (the Greek word for 'repentance' - metanoia - literally means 'change of mind'). To touch upon the mystery of the Holy Trinity is impossible unless the mind changes from a rational way of thinking and becomes illumined by divine grace.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not an invention of theologians, not a teaching which gradually developed within the Church, but divinely revealed truth. At the Baptism of Jesus Christ, God reveals Himself in all clarity to the world as Unity in three Persons: 'Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven: Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased' (Luke 3:21-22). The voice of the Father is heard from the heavens, the Son stands in the waters of the Jordan, and the Spirit descends upon Him.

Jesus Christ repeatedly speaks of His unity with the Father, and of His being sent into the world by the Father. He also promises to send His disciples the Spirit, the Comforter, Who proceeds from the Father (John 14:16-17; 15:26). Sending His disciples out into the world to preach, He says to them: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt.28:19), which becomes the baptismal formula of the early Christian Church. The apostles themselves refer to the three Persons: 'There are three witnesses in the heavens; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and these three agree' (1 John 5:7).

At the Incarnation of the Word God revealed Himself to the world as One in three Persons. The Jews, who had preserved their sacred faith in the one God, would have been unable to grasp the idea of a Divine Trinity as this would unmistakably have been taken to mean polytheism. At a time when polytheistic religion ruled the world, the mystery of the Trinity was hidden from human gaze. It was hidden as if it were in the very depths, in the very heart of the dogma of the divine unity.

HOW TO EXPLAIN THE MYSTERY OF THE HOLY TRINITY?

One of the simplest ways of explaining the mystery of the Trinity is that reportedly given by St Spyridon of Trimithund at the Council of Nicaea (AD 325).

According to tradition, when asked how it is that Three can simultaneously be One, St Spyridon responded by taking up a brick and squeezing it. From the soft clay in his hands a flame shoy up while imultaneously water flowed downwards. 'As there is fire and water in this brick', said St Spyridon, 'in the same way there are three Persons in the one Godhead'.

Another version of the same story (or it may be a different story) is found in the Acts of the Council of Nicaea. One philosopher argued long and hard with the Fathers of the Council, trying to prove logically that the Son cannot be consubstantial with the Father. Exhausted by long debates and eager to leave, the Fathers were suddenly confronted by a simple elderly shepherd (identified as St Spyridon), who announced that he was prepared to argue with the philosopher and disprove his arguments. Turning to the philosopher, the shepherd looked at him severely, and said: 'Listen, O philosopher, God is one, the Creator of heaven and earth, Who has created all things through the power of the Son and the operation of the Holy Spirit. This Son of God became incarnate, lived among people, died for us and rose again. Do not labour in vain to seek evidence for that which is comprehended by faith alone, but answer me: do you believe in the Son of God?' Struck by these words, the philosopher could only say, 'I do'. The shepherd said: 'If you believe, then let us go to the church and there I will bring you into communion with this true faith'. The philosopher immediately stood up and went with the shepherd. On his way out, he said to those present: 'When people tried to convince me with words, I countered words with words; but when a divine power came forth from the mouth of this old man, then words were no match for this power, as man cannot contend against God'.

We have already faced a very similar dilemma when discussing the doctrine of God: human words cannot convey the divine reality. God's enlightenment and His grace are needed, for us to comprehend trinitarian theology. No terminology or formulation is adequate to communicate the mystery of the Trinity. Yet the Christian faith is above all trinitarian, and it is crucially important for every Christian to partake fully in this mystery. For an Orthodox Christian, the Trinity is not an abstract theological concept: it is a reality which is to be lived through. The Trinity is Someone to Whom we pray, but it is also Community, the Communion of three in one, the Family in Whose image we build up our own human community.

UNITY OF LOVE

God the Trinity is not a frozen entity, not something static or lifeless. On the contrary, within the Trinity there is the plenitude of life and love. 'God is love', says St John the Theologian (1 John 4:8; 4:16). Yet there can be no love without the beloved. A lonely, isolated monad can love only itself: self-love is not love. An egocentric unit is not a personality. As the human person cannot experience his personhood save through communion with other persons, so in God there can be no personal being save through love for another personal being. God the Trinity is the plenitude of love, each hypostatic Person exists in a relationship of love for the other Persons.

The Trinity is therefore a relational entity. The relations between the three Persons are relations between 'I' and 'Thou', or 'I' and 'He'. 'Thou, Father, art in Me,

and I in Thee', says Christ (John 17:21). Concerning the Holy Spirit, our Lord says, 'All that the Father has is Mine; therefore I said that he will take what is Mine and declare it to you' (John 16:15). We read in St John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God' (John 1:1). The Greek text actually says 'and the Word was towards God' (pros ton Theon). This underscores the personal nature of the relationship between God the Word and God the Father: the Son is not only born from the Father, He not only exists with the Father, He is turned towards the Father. Thus each Hypostasis in the Trinity is turned towards the other Hypostases.

The icon of the Holy Trinity by St Andrei Rublev portrays three angels sitting at a table upon which is a Cup, the symbol of Christ's redemptive sacrifice; the three Persons of the Trinity turn simultaneously to each other and to the Cup. The icon has captured the divine love which reigns within the Trinity. The greatest manifestation of this love was the incarnation of the Son of God for the redemption of humanity. Orthodox Tradition regards Christ's saving sacrifice as a common act of love and self-emptying of all three Persons of the Trinity. It is in this sacrifice that the love which exists within the Trinity was given and became known to humans. As St Philaret of Moscow said, it is the 'crucifying love of the Father, the crucified love of the Son, and the love of the Holy Spirit triumphing through the power of the Cross'.

GOD THE CREATOR

A fundamental difference between the biblical account of creation on the one hand, and that of the Hellenistic on the other, is that the latter never affirmed a creation ex nihilo. Plato's Demiurge produces everything from primordial matter; the biblical Creator constructs the world out of nothing: 'Look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed' (2 Macc.7:28). Everything that exists received its being from the free will of the Creator: 'for He spoke, and it came to be; He commanded, and it stood forth' (Ps.33:9). God had no need to create the world. Even His love, which, like any true love, needs an object to love, could not constrain Him to create. His love already found its perfection in the communion of the Hypostases of the Holy Trinity where each Hypostasis is both subject and object, lover and beloved. God created the world because He wanted the superabundant life and goodness within Himself to be shared by other beings that would become partakers of divine beatitude and holiness.

Creation was an act which involved all three Persons of the Holy Trinity: 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of His mouth' (Ps.33:6). At the beginning of his Gospel St John speaks of the creative role of God the Word: 'All things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made' (John 1:3). The Bible also has this to say about the Spirit: 'The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters' (Gen.1:2). The Word and the Spirit are, to use an image of St Irenaeus of Lyons, the 'two hands' of the Father. This denotes the co-operation, the working together of the three persons: Their will is one, but each has a specific, different action. 'Originator of all things is one: He creates through the Son and perfects through the Holy Spirit... Perceive these three: the Lord Who commands, the

Word Who creates, and the Spirit Who strengthens', says St Basil the Great. In other words, in the act of creation the Father is the First Cause of all things, the Word (Logos) has the role of Demiurge-Creator, and the Holy Spirit brings to perfection all things that have been created.

It is not without reason that when speaking of the creative role of the Son, the church Fathers prefer the name 'Word' above all other names: the Word makes known the Father and reveals the Father to the created world. Like any word, the Word-Logos is addressed to someone, in this case to the whole of creation. 'No one has ever seen God; the only Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made him known' (John 1:18). The Son has made known the Father to all creatures; it is because of the Son that the love of the Father has been poured out upon creation and has given it life.

Why did God create all things? Patristic theology answers the question in this way: 'out of the abundance of His love and goodness'. 'Because the good and transcendently good God was not content to contemplate Himself, but by a superabundance of goodness saw fit that there should be some things to benefit by and to participate in His goodness, He brings all things from nothing into being and creates them', writes St John of Damascus. In other words, God desired that there should be something else taking part in His blessedness and partaking of His love.

THE ANGELS

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Gen.1:1). Traditionally these verses of the Bible are understood as pointing to the two worlds created by God - one invisible, spiritual and intelligible, and the other visible and material. We have already said that there are no abstract concepts in biblical language and spiritual realities are often expressed by the word 'heaven'. Christ speaks of the Kingdom of heaven, and in the Lord's prayer we say, 'Our Father Who art in heaven... Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Matt.6:9-10). It is obvious that reference is not being made to visible material sky. The Kingdom of God is a spiritual, not a material, Kingdom in which God abides, for by nature He is Spirit. And when we read that He 'created the heavens', this means the spiritual world and its inhabitants, the angels.

God created the angelic world before the visible universe. The angels are incorporeal spirits who possess reason and free will. St John of Damascus speaks of them being 'ever in motion, free, incorporeal, ministering to God', of their rational, intelligent and free nature. He calls the angels 'secondary spiritual lights, who receive their brightness from the first Light which is without beginning'. Located in direct proximity to God, they are sustained by His light and convey this light to us.

Angels are actively engaged in the unceasing praise of God. Isaiah describes his vision of God around whom the seraphim stand and proclaim: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory' (Is.6:1-3). Yet the angels are also heralds sent by God to people (the Greek word aggelos means 'messenger', 'herald'): they take a vital and active part in the life of every person. Thus the archangel announces to Mary that she will bear a Son called Jesus; angels come and minister to Jesus in the wilderness; an angel supports Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Christ Himself

indicates that every person has his own guardian angel (cf. Matt.18:10) who is his companion, helper and protector.

According to the traditional teaching of the Church, not all angels are equal in dignity and closeness to God: various hierarchies exist among them. In the treatise The Celestial Hierarchy, attributed to Dionysius the Aeropagite, the author counts three angelic hierarchies, each of which is divided into three ranks. The first and highest contains the seraphim, cherubim, thrones; the second, dominions, powers, authorities; the third, principalities, archangels, angels.

In is celestial hierarchy the upper ranks are illumined by the Divine light and partake of the mysteries of the Godhead directly from the Maker, while the lower ranks receive illumination only by devolution through the higher ranks. According to Dionysius, the angelic hierarchy finds its continuation and reflection in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of sacraments, clergy and the faithful. Thus, the ecclesiastical hierarchy partakes of the Divine mystery through the mediation of the celestial hierarchy. Biblical tradition speaks of the number of angels in general terms: there are a 'thousand thousands and ten thousand times ten thousand'. The angels certainly outnumber human beings. St Gregory of Nyssa sees in the image of the lost sheep the entire human race, while he takes the ninety-nine sheep who stayed in the hills to be the angels.

THE ORIGIN OF EVIL

At the dawn of creation, before God made the visible world, but after the creation of the angels, there was a great catastrophe, of which we have knowledge only by its consequences. A group of angels opposed itself to God and fell away from Him, thereby becoming enemies of all that was good and holy. At the head of this rebellion stood Lucifer, whose very name (literally meaning 'light-bearing') indicates that originally he was good. By his own will he changed from his natural state into one which was unnatural; he opposed himself to God and fell away from good into evil. Lucifer, also called the devil (Greek diabolos - 'divider', 'separator', 'slanderer'), belonged to one of the highest ranks in the angelic hierarchy. Together with him other angels also defected, as the Book of Revelation tells us metaphorically: 'And a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch... and a third of the stars was struck, so that a third of their light was darkened' (Rev.8:10, 12). Some commentators therefore say that along with the morning star a third of the angels fell away.

By exercising their own free will the devil and his demons found themselves in darkness. Every reasonable living creature, whether angel or human being, possesses free will: the right to choose between good and evil. Free will is the property of everyone so that we can, by practising good, become an ontological part of that good. In other words, goodness was never meant to be granted externally to us but must become our very own possession. If God imposed goodness as a necessity or an inevitability, then no one could ever become a perfectly free person. 'Nobody has ever become good by force', says St Symeon the New Theologian. Through unceasing growth in virtue the angels were meant to ascend to the plenitude of perfection, to the point of utter assimilation to the God of supreme goodness. Yet some of them chose to reject God and thereby sealed their own fate and the fate of the universe, which from that moment onwards became an arena for

two contending polar (yet not equal) principles and powers: the Divine and the demonic, God and the devil.

The problem of the origin of evil has always been a challenge for Christian theology as it has often had to contend with overt or hidden manifestations of dualism. According to some dualistic sects, the entirety of being is made up of two realms which have forever existed together: the kingdom of light filled with many good aeons (angels), and the kingdom of darkness, filled with evil aeons (demons). Spiritual reality is subject to the god of light, while the god of darkness (Satan) has unlimited dominion over the material world. Matter itself is a sinful and evil entity: the humans should by all means possible mortify their bodies in order to be liberated from matter and return to the non-material world of good.

Christian theology viewed the nature and origin of evil differently. Evil is not a primeval essence that is coeternal and equal to God; it is a falling away from good, it is a revolt against good. In this sense it would be wrong to call evil a 'substance', as it does not exist in its own right. As darkness or shadow are not independent beings but are simply the absence or lack of light, so evil is merely the absence of good. 'Evil', writes St Basil the Great, 'is not a living and animated substance, but a condition of the soul which is opposed to virtue and which springs up in the slothful because of their falling away from Good. Do not, therefore, contemplate evil from without; and do not imagine some original nature of wickedness, but let each one recognize himself as the first author of the vice that is in him'.

God did not create anything evil: both angels and humans, as well as the material world, are good and beautiful by nature. However, rational creatures, possessing free will, can direct their freedom against God and thereby engender evil. This is precisely what happened: the light-bearing morning star (Lucifer), originally created good, abused his freedom, defaced his own virtuous nature and fell away from the Source of goodness.

AN EVIL-DOER

Without intrinsic substance or being, evil materialized into an active agent of destruction when it was 'hypostasized', that is, when it became a reality in the form of the devil and the demons. Fr Geogres Florovsky speaks of evil as 'nothingness', as 'a pure negation, a privation or a mutilation'. Evil is primarily a lack, an absence of goodness. Compared with the Divine being, the operation of evil is illusory and imagined: the devil has no power where God does not allow him to operate.

Yet, as being a slanderer and a liar, the devil uses falsehood as his main weapon: he deceives his victim into believing that within his hands are concentrated great power and authority. The truth is that he does not have this power at all. As Vladimir Lossky emphasizes, in the Lord's Prayer we do not ask God to deliver us from a general evil, but to deliver us from the evil one, from the evil-doer, a concrete person that embodies evil. This 'evil-doer', whose nature was originally good, is the bearer of that deadly non-being, non-life, which leads to his own death and the death of his victim.

Most assuredly, God is not a party to evil, yet evil is somehow under His control: it is God Who sets the boundaries in which evil can operate. As the opening of the book of Job shows, there is a certain direct and personal relationship between God and the

devil (cf. Job 1-2); the nature of this relationship is, however, unknown to us. According to the mysterious ways of His Providence, and for purposes of edification, God allows evil to act as a means of setting people aright. This is evident from those parts of Scripture where God is recorded as visiting evil upon people: thus God hardened the heart of Pharaoh (Ex.4:21; 7:3; 14:4); God visited Saul with an evil spirit (1 Sam.16:14; 19:9); God gave the people 'statutes that were not good' (Ezek.20:25); God gave the people up to 'impurity', 'dishonourable passions' and a 'base mind' (Rom.1:24-32). In all of these instances it is not God Who is the source of evil: in possessing utter power over both good and evil, God can allow evil to operate in order to transform it into a source of virtue and to direct it towards good consequences. He can also use it to deliver people from a yet greater evil.

The obvious question still remains: why does God allow evil and the devil to exist? Why does He permit evil? St Augustine confessed that he could not answer this question: 'I am unable to penetrate the depths of this ordinance and I confess that it is beyond my powers', he wrote. St Gregory of Nyssa answered the question in a more optimistic manner: God permits the devil to act for a certain time only, yet there will come a time when evil will be 'finally obliterated by the long cycle of ages' and when 'nothing outside of good will remain, but the confession of Christ's lordship will be unanimous even from the demons'. The belief in the final restoration of the demons and the devil into their initial state was held also by St Isaac of Nineveh, as well as by some other early church writers. However, this opinion has never become a magisterial teaching of the Church.

The Church knows that evil is neither co-eternal with God nor equal to Him. That the devil rebelled against God and even became the king and ruler of hell does not mean that his kingdom will last for ever. On the contrary, Christian eschatology, as we shall see later, is profoundly optimistic and strongly holds faith in the final victory of good over evil, God over the devil, Christ over the Antichrist. Yet, what this victory will entail and what the final outcome of the existence of evil will be still remains unclear in Christian teaching. Pondering on this, the human mind once more falls silent in the presence of the mystery, powerless to delve into the depths of Divine destinies. As God says in the book of Isaiah, 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways' (Is.55:8-9 in Septuagint translation).

THE UNIVERSE

According to the Old Testament, the visible world was created in six days. It is difficult to imagine that reference is being made to a conventional six-day period. The biblical six days of creation are not six ordinary days but rather six consecutive stages which unfold gradually to form the epic picture of the great Artist.

The biblical account of creation opens with the words, 'In the beginning' (Gen.1:1), a phrase also used by St John the Theologian to describe the eternal existence of the Word of God (John 1:1). This 'beginning' therefore refers to what had existed before time began. It is not yet finite time: it is infinite eternity, from whic time is to be born. The 'beginning' is that first reality which links time with eternity, since from the moment when time is set into motion the universe must subject itself to its laws.

According to the laws of time, the past is already over, the future is yet to come, and the present exists as an elusive and forever fleeting second which ends once it has hardly begun. And although time appears simultaneously with the universe, that timeless 'beginning' when the universe was poised to begin but not yet began, is a pledge of the fact that creatin has been allied with eternity and that upon the completion of its history will once again become part of eternity.

Eternity is the absence of time; outside of time there is no temporal being, but an eternal being, a supra-being. The universe, which has been called out of non-being into temporal being through the creative word of God, will not disappear at the end of time, it will not slide away into non-being, but will become part of the supra-being; it will become eternal. Biblical revelation, however, puts the universe in the perspective of both time and eternity, so that even when time disintergates the universe will remain. Time is an icon of eternity and time will be sublimated into eternity, while the universe will be transformed into the kingdom of the age to come.

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters' (Gen.1:1-2). Other ancient translations of the Old Testament present the earth as 'empty and nothing' (Theodotiones), or 'idle and indistinguishable' (Simmachus); that is, as a formless pre-matter out of which the world was to be created. The 'earth' of the first day is, to use St Philaret of Moscow's expression, an 'astonishing emptiness', a chaotic primary substance containing the pledge of future beauty and cosmic harmony. The 'darkness' and the 'deep' underscore the disorganization and formlessness of matter, while the water denotes its plasticity. It is said that the Holy Spirit was 'moving', fluttering over the water. Elsewhere in the Bible this same verb is used to signify the hovering of birds over the nest of their young: 'The eagle stirs up its nest and flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, and bearing them on its pinions' (Deut.32:11). The Holy Spirit, as a loving mother, protects and animates the material world, 'fluttering' over it and breathing into it the 'spirit of life'.

THE SIX DAYS OF CREATION

'And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good' (Gen.1:3-4). The light of the first day is neither sunlight nor moonlight (these appeared on the fourth day), but is the light of the Godhead reflected in created being. The words 'said' and 'saw' are anthropomorphisms and both have profound meaning. The term 'said' points to the operation of the Word of God, while 'saw that it was good' indicates the state of perfection to which material creation is brought by the Holy Spirit. These biblical expressions point to the consciousness and the expediency of God's creative activity, to the Artist's satisfaction that the Cosmos, which He has created, is truly beautiful.

On the second day God created the 'firmament', an expanse possessing firmness and stability. On the third day He formed the dry land and the sea, separating one from the other. On the fourth day He made the sun, the moon and the other lights: it was from this moment that the mechanism of the day was put into motion, the rhythmic changing

cycle of day and night. On the fifth day, at God's command, the waters brought forth fish and creeping things, while the air became the habitation of the birds. Finally, on the sixth day appeared the animals and humanity.

We shall not compare the biblical story of creation with modern scientific theories of the origin of the universe. The protracted dialogue between science and theology has not yet come to any definitive conclusions about the connections between biblical revelation and scientific developments. It is, however, very clear that the Bible does not aim to present a scientific account of the origin of the universe, and it is rather naive to polemicize on the biblical narrative understood in its literal sense. Sacred Scripture regards all of history from the perspective of an interrelationship between the human and the divine. The authors of biblical stories often use metaphorical and symbolic language and they often rely on the scientific knowledge of their own time. This, however, does not diminish the significance of the Bible as a book through which God speaks to humanity and reveals God in all His creative power.

The universe as created by God is a book, which reveals the Creator to those who can read it. Those of no faith, when observing the material world, cannot see in it the reflection of a higher non-material Beauty; for them the world contains nothing miraculous, everything is natural and conventional. But for the believers, the beauty and harmony of the universe is a most powerful testimony to the existence of God, the Creator of all. St Anthony, the fourth-century Egyptian hermit, was once visited by a famous philosopher and was asked: 'Father, how can you endure to live here, deprived as you are of all consolation from books?' Anthony answered: 'My book, O philosopher, is the nature of created things, and whenever I wish I can read in it the works of God'.

THE HUMAN PERSON

Human beings constitute the crown of creation, the peak of the creative process of the Divine Trinity. Before creating Adam, the three Persons took counsel together: 'Let Us make man in Our own image, after Our likeness' (Gen.1:26). The 'Pre-eternal Counsel' of the Three was necessary first because humans were a higher creature with reason, will, and dominion over the visible world, and second, because, being free and independent, humanity would break the commandment and fall away from the bliss of Paradise. The Son's sacrifice on the Cross would then be required to show humans the way back to God. In creating human beings God knew their subsequent destiny, for nothing is hidden from the gaze of God Who sees the future as much as He sees the present.

God formed Adam 'of dust from the ground', that is, from matter. Thus he was flesh of the flesh of the earth from which he was moulded by the hands of God. Yet God also 'breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being' (Gen.2:7). Being material or earthly, Adam received a Divine principle, a pledge of his communion with the Divine being. 'The breath of life' can be taken to mean the Holy Spirit. The human person partakes of the divine nature by the very act of creation and is thereby utterly different from other living beings: he does not simply assume a higher position in the hierarchy of animals but is a 'semi-god' set over the animal kingdom. The

church Fathers call the human being a 'mediator' between the visible and invisible worlds, a 'mixture' of both worlds.

As the heart of the created world, combining within himself both the spiritual and the corporeal, the human being in a certain sense surpasses the angels. It was not the angel but the human being who was created by God in His own image. And it was not angelic, but human nature, that was assumed by God in the Incarnation.

IMAGE AND LIKENESS

'So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them' (Gen.1:27). Because a solitary egocentric monad is incapable of love, God created not a unit but a couple with the intention that love should reign among people. And because the love of the couple is not yet the perfection of love and being, God commands: 'Be fruitful and multiply' (Gen.1:28). From two human beings the third, their child, must be born: the perfect family - husband, wife and child, is the reflection of divine love in three Hypostases. Indeed one cannot but notice the affinity of the interchange between the singular and plural when the Bible speaks of God ('Let Us make man in Our image' - 'God created man in His own image') and the singular and plural when it speaks of humans ('created him' - 'created them'). This interchange emphasizes the unity of the nature of the human race even when there is a distinction between the hypostases of each individual person.

The theme of image and likeness is central to Christian anthropology: to a greater or lesser extent it was addressed by nearly all early church writers. The Fathers of the Church usually equated 'the image of God' to the rational and spiritual nature of the human person. 'What is after the image if not our intellect?' asks St John of Damascus. 'We are created in the image of the Maker, we possess reason and the faculty of speech, which comprise the perfection of our nature', writes St Basil the Great.

'The image of God' has been understood by some Fathers as our free will and self-determination. 'When God in His supernal goodness creates each soul in His own image, He brings it into being endowed with self-determination', says St Maximus the Confessor. God created the person absolutely free: in His love He wishes to force him neither into good nor evil. In return, He does not expect from us blind obedience but love. It is only in our being free that we can be assimilated to God through love for Him.

Other Fathers identified as 'the image of God' the human person's immortality, his dominant position in the world and his striving towards good.

Our ability to create, as the reflection of the creative ability of the Maker Himself, is also regarded as being 'in God's image'. God is the 'worker': 'My Father is working still, and I am working', says Christ (John 5:17). The human person was also commanded to 'till' the garden of Eden (Gen.2:15), that is, to labour in it and to work the land. While the human person is unable to create ex nihilo ('out of nothing'), he can create from material given to him by God, and this material is the entire earth, over which he is lord and master. The world has no need to be improved by people; rather, humans themselves need to apply their creative abilities in order to be assimilated to God.

Some church Fathers distinguish 'image' from 'likeness' by identifying the image as that which had been originally fixed by the Creator in the human person, and the

likeness as that which is to be attained through a life of virtue: ‘The expression according to the image indicates that which is reasonable and endowed with free will, while the expression according to the likeness denotes assimilation through virtue, in as far as this is possible’ (St John of Damascus). The human person is called upon to realize all of his creative abilities in ‘tilling’ the world, in creativity, in virtue, in love, so that he can be assimilated to God. For, as St Gregory of Nyssa says, ‘the limit of a life of virtues is the assimilation of God’.

SOUL AND BODY

All ancient religious tradition maintain that humans are composed of both material and spiritual elements; but the correlation between the two has been understood in different ways. The dualistic religions view matter as originally evil and hostile towards humanity: the Manichaeans even believed that Satan was the maker of the material world. Classical philosophy regards the body as a prison in which the soul is kept captive or incarcerated. Indeed Plato deduces the word soma (body) from sema (tombstone, tomb): ‘Many people believe that the body is like a tombstone concealing the soul buried beneath it in this life... The soul endures punishment... while the flesh does duty as its fortress so that it can be healed, while located in the body as in a torture chamber’.

The ancient Indian philosophies speak of the transmigration of souls from one body to another, even from a human being to an animal (and vice versa). The doctrine of metempsychosis (reincarnation) was rejected by early church tradition as incompatible with divine revelation. It was proclamed senseless and erroneus on the basis of the assertion that a human being, who possesses reason and free will, cannot be transformed into an unintelligible animal, since all intelligible being is immortal and cannot disappear. Moreover, what is the point of someone’s being punished for sins committed in an earlier life if he does not know why he has to endure it (after all, it is impossible to recollect one’s previous ‘existence’)?

The church Fathers, basing themselves on Scripture, teach that the soul and the body are not foreign elements united temporarily in the individual, but are bestowed simultaneously and for all time in the very act of creation: the soul is ‘betrothed’ to the body and is inseparable from it. Only the totality of soul and body together comprises a complete personality, a hypostasis. St Gregory of Nyssa calls the unbreakable link between soul and body an ‘inclination of affection’, ‘commixture’, ‘community’, ‘attraction’ and ‘acquaintance’, which are preserved even after death. Such a concept is far removed from Platonic and Eastern dualism.

PRIMORDIAL HUMANITY BEFORE THE FALL

Materialists claim that in the early developmental stages of the human race people were like animals and led a bestial way of life: they neither knew God nor did they possess concepts of morality. Opposed to this are the Christian beliefs in the bliss of the first humans in Paradise, their subsequent fall and their eventual expulsion from Eden.

According to the Book of Genesis, God creates Adam and brings him into Paradise, where he lives in harmony with nature: he understands the language of the animals, and they obey him; all of the elements are subject to him as if to a king.

God brings to Adam all of the animals 'to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name' (Gen.2:19). Adam gives a name to every animal and bird a name: by doing so he demonstrates his ability to know the meaning, the hidden logos (reason) of every living creature. By giving Adam the right to name to the whole of creation, God brings him into the very heart of His creative process and calls him to co-creativeness, to co-operation.

God brings the primordial man into existence to be a priest of the entire visible creation. He alone of all living creatures is capable of praising God verbally and blessing Him. The entire universe is entrusted to him as a gift, for which he is to bring a 'sacrifice of praise' and which he is to offer back to God as 'Thine own of Thine own'. In this unceasing eucharistic offering lies the meaning and justification of human existence. The heavens, the earth, the sea, the fields and mountains, the birds and the animals, indeed the whole of creation assign humans to this high priestly ministry in order that God may be praised through their lips.

God allows Adam and Eve to taste of all the trees of Paradise, including the tree of life which grants immortality. However, He forbids them to taste of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because 'to know evil' is to become party to it and to fall away from bliss and immortality. Adam is given the right to choose between good and evil, even though God makes him aware of the correct choice and warns him of the consequences of falling from grace. In choosing evil, Adam falls away from life and 'dies a death'; in choosing good, he ascends to perfection and attains the highest goal of his existence.

THE FALL

The biblical story of the Fall prefigures the entire tragic history of the human race. It shows us who we were and what we have become. It reveals that evil entered the world not by the will of God but by fault of humans who preferred diabolical deceit to divine commandment. From generation to generation the human race repeats Adam's mistake in being beguiled by false values and forgetting the true ones - faith in God and verity to Him.

Sin was not ingrained in human nature. Yet the possibility to sin was rooted in the free will given to humans. It was indeed freedom that rendered the human being as an image of the Maker; but it was also freedom that from the very beginning contained within itself the possibility to fall away from God. Out of His love for humans God did not want to interfere in their freedom and forcibly avert sin. But neither could the devil force them to do evil. The sole responsibility for the Fall is borne by humans themselves, for they misused the freedom given to them.

What constituted the sin of the first people? St Augustine believes it to be disobedience. On the other hand, the majority of early church writers say that Adam fell as a result of pride. Pride is the wall that separates humans from God. The root of pride is egocenticity, the state of being turned in on oneself, self-love, lust for oneself. Before the

Fall, God was the only object of the humans' love; but then there appeared a value outside of God: the tree was suddenly seen to be 'good for food', 'a delight to the eyes', and something 'to be desired' (Gen.3:6). Thus the entire hierarchy of values collapsed: my own 'I' occupied the first place while the second was taken by the object of 'my' lust. No place has remained for God: He has been forgotten, driven from my life.

The forbidden fruit failed to bring happiness to the first people. On the contrary, they began to sense their own nakedness: they were ashamed and tried to hide from God. This awareness of one's nakedness denotes the privation of the divine light-bearing garment that cloaked humans and defended them from the 'knowledge of evil'. Adam's first reaction after committing sin was burning sensation of shame. The second reaction was his desire to hide from the Creator. This shows that he had lost all notion of God's omnipresence and would search for any place where God was 'absent'.

However, this was not a total rupture with God. The Fall was not a complete abandonment: humans could repent and regain their former dignity. God goes out to find the fallen Adam; between the trees of Paradise He seeks him out asking 'Where are you?' (Gen.3:9). This humble wandering of God through Paradise prefigures Christ's humility as revealed to us in the New Testament, the humility with which the Shepherd seeks the lost sheep. God has no need to go forth and look for Adam: He can call down from the heavens with a voice of thunder or shake the foundations of the earth. Yet He does not wish to be Adam's judge, or his prosecutor. He still wants to count him as an equal and puts His hope in Adam's repentance. But instead of repenting, Adam utters words of self-justification, laying the blame for everything on his wife: 'The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate' (Gen.3:12). In other words, 'It was You who gave me a wife; it is You who is to blame'. In turn, Eve lays the blame for everything on the serpent.

The consequences of the Fall for the first humans were catastrophic. They were not only deprived of the bliss and sweetness of Paradise, but their whole nature was changed and disfigured. In sinning they fell away from their natural condition and entered an unnatural state of being. All elements of their spiritual and corporeal make-up were damaged: their spirit, instead of striving for God, became engrossed in the passions; their soul entered the sphere of bodily instincts; while their body lost its original lightness and was transformed into heavy sinful flesh. After the Fall the human person 'became deaf, blind, naked, insensitive to the good things from which he had fallen away, and above all became mortal, corruptible and without sense of purpose' (St Symeon the New Theologian). Disease, suffering and pain entered human life. Humans became mortal for they had lost the opportunity of tasting from the tree of life.

Not only humanity but also the entire world changed as a result of the Fall. The original harmony between people and nature had been broken; the elements had become hostile; storms, earthquakes and floods could destroy life. The earth would no longer provide everything of its own accord; it would have to be tilled 'in the sweat of your face', and would produce 'thorns and thistles'. Even the animals would become the human being's enemy: the serpent would 'bruise his heel' and other predators would attack him (Gen.3:14-19). All of creation would be subject to the 'bondage of decay'. Together with humans it would now 'wait for freedom' from this bondage, since it did not submit to vanity voluntarily but through the fault of humanity (Rom.8:19-21).

"ORIGINAL SIN"

After Adam and Eve sin spread rapidly throughout the human race. They were guilty of pride and disobedience, while their son Cain committed fratricide. Cain's descendants soon forgot about God and set about organizing their earthly existence. Cain himself 'built a city'. One of his closest descendants was 'the father of those who dwell in tents and have cattle'; another was 'the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe'; yet another was 'the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron' (Gen.4:17-22). The establishment of cities, cattle-breeding, music and other arts were thus passed onto humankind by Cain's descendants as a surrogate of the lost happiness of Paradise.

The consequences of the Fall spread to the whole of the human race. This is elucidated by St Paul: 'Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned' (Rom.5:12). This text, which formed the Church's basis of her teaching on 'original sin', may be understood in a number of ways: the Greek words ef' ho pantes hemarton may be translated not only as 'because all men sinned' but also 'in whom [that is, in Adam] all men sinned'. Different readings of the text may produce different understandings of what 'original sin' means.

If we accept the first translation, this means that each person is responsible for his own sins, and not for Adam's transgression. Here, Adam is merely the prototype of all future sinners, each of whom, in repeating Adam's sin, bears responsibility only for his own sins. Adam's sin is not the cause of our sinfulness; we do not participate in his sin and his guilt cannot be passed onto us.

However, if we read the text to mean 'in whom all have sinned', this can be understood as the passing on of Adam's sin to all future generations of people, since human nature has been infected by sin in general. The disposition toward sin became hereditary and responsibility for turning away from God sin universal. As St Cyril of Alexandria states, human nature itself has 'fallen ill with sin'; thus we all share Adam's sin as we all share his nature. St Macarius of Egypt speaks of 'a leaven of evil passions' and of 'secret impurity and the abiding darkness of passions', which have entered into our nature in spite of our original purity. Sin has become so deeply rooted in human nature that not a single descendant of Adam has been spared from a hereditary predisposition toward sin.

The Old Testament writers had a vivid sense of their inherited sinfulness: 'Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me' (Ps.51:7). They believed that God 'visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation' (Ex.20:5). In the latter words reference is not made to innocent children but to those whose own sinfulness is rooted in the sins of their forefathers.

From a rational point of view, to punish the entire human race for Adam's sin is an injustice. But not a single Christian dogma has ever been fully comprehended by reason. Religion within the bounds of reason is not religion but naked rationalism, for religion is supra-rational, supra-logical. The doctrine of original sin is disclosed in the light of divine revelation and acquires meaning with reference to the dogma of the

atonement of humanity through the New Adam, Christ: '...As one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous... so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord' (Rom.5:18-21).

JESUS CHRIST, THE "NEW ADAM"

The first-created Adam was unable to fulfil the vocation laid before him: to attain deification and bring to God the visible world by means of spiritual and moral perfection. Having broken the commandment and having fallen away from the sweetness of Paradise, he had the way to deification closed to him. Yet everything that the first man left undone was accomplished for him by God Incarnate, the Word-become-flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ. He trod that path to the human person which the latter was meant to tread towards Him. And if this would have been the way of ascent for the human person, for God it was the way of humble condescension, of self-emptying (kenosis).

St Paul calls Christ the 'second Adam', contrasting Him with the 'first': 'The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven' (1 Cor.15:47). This parallelism was developed by St John Chrysostom, who emphasized that Adam was the prototype of Christ: 'Adam is the image of Christ ...as the man for those who came from him, even though they did not eat of the tree, became the cause of death, then Christ for those who were born of Him, although they have done no good, became the bearer of righteousness, which he gave to all of us through the cross'.

Few people accepted the second Adam or believed in Him when He down to earth. The Incarnate Jesus, Who suffered and was raised, became a 'a stumbling block to Jews and folly [Greek, skandalon] to Gentiles' (1 Cor.1:23). Declaring Himself to be God and making Himself equal to God, Jesus scandalize Jews and was accused in blasphemy. As to the Greeks, Christianity was folly for them because Greek thought sought a logical and rational explanation for everything; it was not within its power to know a suffering and dying God. For many centuries Greek wisdom built a temple to 'an unknown God' (Acts 17:23). It was incapable of understanding how an unknowable, incomprehensible, all-powerful, almighty, omniscient and omnipresent God could become a mortal, suffering, weak human person. A God, Who would be born of a Virgin, a God Who would be in swaddling clothes, Who would be put to sleep and be fed with milk: all of this seemed absurd to the Greeks.

Even among the Christians of the first centuries, the mystery of godmanhood was explained in a different ways. In the second century the Docetists claimed that Christ's human nature was merely transparent: it only seemed that He suffered and died on the cross, while God in fact, being passionless, could not suffer at all. The Docetists considered all that was material and corporeal to be evil and could not concede that God had put on sinful and evil flesh, that He had united Himself with dust. The other extreme was that of Arianism which denied Christ's Divinity and reduced the Son of God to the level of created being. How were extremes to be avoided and how was the Church to find a legitimate explanation for the mystery of Christ?

THE CHRIST OF THE GOSPELS: GOD AND MAN

In the Gospels Jesus Christ is simultaneously revealed as both God and man: all of His actions and words are those of a human being and nonetheless marked with the divine imprint. Jesus is born like all other children, but from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin rather than from a husband and a wife. Brought into the temple like other infants, He is greeted by a prophet and prophetess who recognize Him as the Messiah. Jesus grows and becomes strong in spirit while living at his parents' home, yet at the age of twelve He sits in the temple among the teachers and utters mysterious words about His Father. Like others, He comes to be baptized in the Jordan, but at the moment of immersion the voice of the Father is heard and the Holy Spirit appears in the form of a dove. Tired from a journey, He sits by a well and asks a Samaritan woman to give Him a drink, yet He neither drinks nor eats when offered food by His disciples. He sleeps in the stern of a boat, but subdues a violent storm after being awaken. Ascending Mount Tabor, He prays to God as any other person, but is transfigured and reveals the light of His divinity to the apostles. At the tomb of Lazarus He mourns the death of a friend, yet at the words 'Lazarus, arise!' He raises him from the dead. Out of fear Jesus prays to His Father to remove the cup of suffering, but surrenders Himself to the Father's will and agrees to die for the life of the world. Finally, He accepts humiliation and crucifixion, and dies on the cross like a criminal, yet on the third day He rises from the tomb and appears to His disciples.

The Gospels speak irrefutably of Christ's godmanhood. We should note that, though inspired by God, the Gospels were nevertheless written by living people, each of whom described events as he saw and understood them, or as he heard about them from witnesses. In the four Gospel accounts there are differences in details, but these differences bear testimony not to contradiction but to their unity: had the narratives been absolutely identical, we could conclude that their authors conferred among themselves or copied from each other. The Gospels are testimonies in which each fact is true though set out from different perspectives.

THE CHRIST OF FAITH: ONE PERSON IN TWO NATURES

The Gospels speak of Christ as both divine and human, and church Tradition was faced with the task of formulating a dogma on the unity of the divinity and humanity in Christ. This dogma was developed in the course of the Christological debates of the fourth to seventh centuries.

In the second half of the fourth century Apollinarius of Laodicea spoke of the pre-eternal God-Logos Who took human flesh; in his opinion, Christ did not possess a human intellect or soul. In the person of Christ divinity merged with human flesh, which together comprised a single nature. According to the Apollinarian teaching, Christ could not be fully consubstantial with humans as He was wothout a human intellect and soul. He was a 'heavenly man' who had merely assumed a human shell, not a complete earthly human being.

Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia represented a different tendency in Christological thinking. They taught that within Christ there existed two separate, independent natures which related to each other in the following way: God the Logos abided in the man Jesus of Nazareth Whom He had chosen and anointed and with Whom He had 'come into contact' and 'cohabited'. The union of humanity with the Divinity was not absolute but relative: the Logos abided in Christ as in a temple. The earthly life of Jesus, Theodore believed, was the life of a human being in contact with the Logos. God from eternity foresaw the highly virtuous life of Jesus and in view of this elected Him as His organ and as the temple of His divinity. At first, at the moment of birth, this contact was incomplete, but as Jesus grew in spiritual and moral perfection it became fully realized.

In the fifth century Theodore's disciple, Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, followed his teacher in separating Christ's two natures, making a distinction between the Lord and the 'form of a servant', the temple and the 'One Who lives in it', the Almighty God and the 'man who is worshipped'. Nestorius preferred to refer to the Holy Virgin as Christotokos (the Birth Giver of Christ, the Mother of Christ) and not Theotokos (the Birth Giver of God, the Mother of God), for, he said, Mary did not give birth to the Divinity. Popular disturbance regarding the term Theotokos (the people refused to renounce this attribution of the Virgin Mary whuch had been sanctified by Tradition), together with St Cyril of Alexandria's powerful attack on Nestorianism, led to the convocation in 431 of the Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus, which formulated (though not definitively) the Church's doctrine on the God-man.

In speaking about the Son of God, the Council of Ephesus mainly used the terminology of St Cyril, who taught not the 'contact' but the 'union' of the two natures in Christ. At the Incarnation God had appropriated for Himself human nature, while remaining at the same time who He is: although perfect and complete God, He had become a human being in the fullest sense. In order to counteract Theodore and Nestorius, St Cyril constantly asserted that Christ was a single Person, a single Hypostasis. Thus Mary gave birth to the same Person as God the Word. Following this reasoning, St Cyril thought that to renounce the title Theotokos would mean to renounce the mystery of the Incarnation of God, for God the Word and Jesus the man are one and the same.

THE UNITY OF NATURES

By the middle of the fifth century, a new wave of Christological debates became linked with the names of Eutyches, an archimandrite from Constantinople, and his supporter Dioscorus, St Cyril's successor to the episcopal throne of Alexandria. Eutyches spoke in terms of the complete 'merging' of the divinity with the humanity into a 'single incarnate nature of God the Word'. 'I confess that our Lord consisted of two natures before the union, but after the union I confess one nature', said Eutyches.

The Fourth Ecumenical Council, convoked in 451 at Chalcedon, condemned Eutychian Monophysitism and proclaimed the dogma of 'a single hypostasis of God the Word in two natures, divine and human'. According to the Council's teaching, each nature of Christ preserves the fullness of its properties, yet Christ is not divided into two

persons; He remains the single hypostasis of God the Word. This belief was expressed in the Council's dogmatic definition: '...We confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, perfect in Divinity, perfect in humanity, truly God, truly human being, with a rational soul and body, consubstantial with the Father in His Divinity and consubstantial with us in His humanity.., one and the same Christ, the Son, the Only-begotten Lord, discerned in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation'.

These clearly-defined formulas demonstrate the refinement and insight that theological thought had reached in the Christian Church by the fifth century. At the same time they show the caution with which the church Fathers used different terms and formulas in trying to 'express the inexpressible'. Four terms were used to convey the union of the two natures ('without confusion, without change, without division, without separation'), and each was strictly apophatic. The union of the divine and human natures in Christ is a mystery which transcends the intellect and no term is capable of describing it. What is spoken of with precision is how the natures are not united: this is to avoid heresies which could confuse, change and divide the natures. However, how the natures are united, remains concealed from human intellect.

TWO ACTIONS AND TWO WILLS

In the sixth century some theologians, while confessing the two natures of Christ, spoke of Him as having a single divine-human 'action', a single energy. Hence the name of the heresy called Monoenergism. Again, at the beginning of the seventh century another movement arose, Monothelitism, which recognized in Christ only divine will by claiming that His human will was completely swallowed up by the divine. Apart from pursuing purely theological goals, the Monothelites hoped to reconcile the Orthodox with the Monophysites by means of a compromise.

There were two main opponents of Monothelitism in the middle of the seventh century: St Maximus the Confessor, a monk from Constantinople, and St Martin, the pope of Rome. St Maximus taught that there were two energies and two wills in Christ: 'Christ, being God by nature, made use of a will which was naturally divine and paternal, for He had but one will with His Father; being Himself man by nature, He also made use of a naturally human will which was in no way opposed to the Father's will'. The presence of the human will in Christ is especially evident in His prayer in the garden of Gethsemane: 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt' (Matt.26:39). This prayer would have been impossible had the human will of Christ been fully swallowed up by the divine.

For his determination to confess the Christ of the Gospels, St Maximus was subjected to cruel punishment: his tongue was cut out and his right hand amputated. Like St Martin, he died in exile. However, the Sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople, 680-681, upheld completely St Maximus's teaching: 'We preach that in Him (Christ) there are two natural wills and desires, and two natural energies without confusion, without change, without division, without separation. These two natural wills are not opposed to each other... but His human will submits itself to the divine and omnipotent will'. As a fully human person Christ possessed free will, but this freedom did not mean

the choice between good and evil. The human will of Christ freely chooses only the good: there can be no conflict between His human and divine wills.

In these ways the mystery of the divine-human person of Christ, the New Adam and Saviour of the world, was made manifest in the theological experience of the Church.

REDEMPTION

In the New Testament Christ is a called the 'ransom', or 'redemption', for the sins of the human race (Matt.20:28; 1 Cor.1:30). The original Greek word lytrosis means 'ransom', that is, a sum of money the payment of which gives freedom to a slave or life for someone sentenced to death. The human person fell into the slavery of sin and required redemption in order to liberate him from this slavery.

The early Church writers posed the following question: to whom did Christ pay this ransom for humanity? Some suggested that the ransom was paid to the devil through whom humans had become enslaved. Origen, for example, asserted that the Son of God surrendered His spirit into the hands of the Father and gave His soul to the devil as a ransom for humanity. St Gregory the Theologian rebuked Origen for his interpretation of redemption: 'If the great and most glorious blood of God the high priest and sacrifice is given as the price of redemption to the evil one, then how grievous this is! The brigand receives not only the price of the ransom from God, but God Himself!'

St Gregory of Nyssa interprets the redemption as 'deception' and a 'bargain with the devil'. Christ, in order to ransom people, offers the devil His very own flesh, 'concealing' beneath it the Divinity; the devil rushes upon it as bait, but swallows along with the bait the 'hook', Christ's Divinity, and perishes.

A different interpretation has it that the ransom was paid not to the devil, as he has no power over humans, but to God the Father. This point of view was articulated by some Western medieval theologians (in particular, by Anselm of Canterbury). They claimed that primordial humanity's fall aroused God's anger and that divine justice necesserily required satisfaction: as no human sacrifice could suffice, the Son of God Himself became the ransom in order to satisfy divine justice. Chirt's death satisfied divine anger and grace was returned to the human race. The acquisition of this grace is impossible without certain merits like faith and good works. Since humans do not possess these merits, they can derive them from Christ and from the saints, who in their lives accomplished more good works than was necessary for their salvation, and so had them in abundance to share. This theory, which rose at the heart of Latin scholastic theology, bears a juridical stamp and reflects the medieval concept of an offended honour that demands satisfaction. According to this understanding, the death of Christ does not abolish sin, but merely liberates the human person from responsibility for it.

The Eastern Orthodox Church reacted to this understanding in the twelfth century. The Local Council of Constantinople, which was convoked in 1157, stated that Christ brought His redemptive sacrifice not to the Father alone, but to the Trinity as a whole: 'Christ voluntarily offered Himself as a sacrifice, offered Himself in His humanity and Himself accepted the sacrifice as God with the Father and the Spirit... The God-man of the Word offered His redemptive sacrifice to the Father, to Himself as God, and to the Spirit...'

Many early church authors avoid altogether the topic of 'ransom' in the literal sense, taking redemption to mean the reconciliation of the human race with God and adoption as His children. They speak of redemption as the manifestation of God's love for humanity, a view supported by the words of St John the Theologian: 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16). It is not the anger of God the Father but His love that lies behind the sacrificial death of His Son on the Cross.

Every human being is recreated and renewed in Christ. The redemptive act of Christ was not accomplished for an abstract 'mass' of people, but for each concrete individual. As St Symeon says, 'God sent His only-begotten Son to earth for you and for your salvation, for He has seen you and destined you to be His brother and co-heir'.

It is in Christ that the whole history of the human race receives justification, perfection and absolute meaning, including the Fall and expulsion of humans from Paradise. The Incarnation of Christ and His redemptive act have even greater meaning for humans than the very act of their creation. From the moment of God's Incarnation our history begins anew: we find ourselves again face to face with God, so close to Him, and perhaps even closer to Him than were the first human beings. Christ brings us into the 'New Paradise', the Church, where He reigns and where we co-reign with Him.

It is in Christ that the purpose of human existence is realized: communion with God, union with God, deification. According to a work ascribed to St Maximus the Confessor, God 'yearns for the salvation of all men and hungers after their deification'. In His immeasurable love for humans Christ ascended Golgotha and endured death on the Cross, which reconciled and united the human race with God.

CHURCH AS THE KINGDOM OF CHRIST

'There can be no Christianity without the Church', wrote a martyred Russian Orthodox bishop at the beginning of this century. The Church is Christ's Kingdom, purchased by the price of His blood and into which He leads those whom He has chosen as His children and who have chosen Him as their Father.

The Greek word ekklesia, meaning 'Church', 'assembly of people', comes from the verb ekkaleo, 'to call'. The Christian Church is an assembly of those called by Christ, of those who have believed in Him and live by Him. Yet the Church is not merely a society or fellowship of people united by their faith in Christ, it is not just a sum total of individuals. Gathered together, the members of the Church comprise a single body, an indivisible organism.

The first to refer to the Church as the body of Christ was St Paul: 'For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it' (1 Cor.12:13; 27). Through the sacraments, and especially the sacrament of communion in the Body and Blood of Christ through the eucharistic bread and wine, we are united with Him and we become one body in Him: 'Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread' (1 Cor.10:17). The Church is the eucharistic body of Christ: the Eucharist unites us to Him and to each other. And the closer we are to God, the closer we are to each other; the more we are filled with

love for Christ, the stronger our love for our neighbour. In being united to God through a life in the sacraments, we are united to each other, we overcome our usual lack of communication and alienation, we become members of an undivided organism tied to each other in a union of love.

The mystery of the Church was prefigured in the people of Israel, who was chosen and set apart from the other peoples. According to its own understanding, the Christian Church is the only legitimate heir to the biblical religion of revelation. This revelation is preserved and continued in the Church's Tradition, which includes both the Old and the New Testaments, the memory of Jesus Christ's earthly life, of His miracles and teaching, His death and resurrection. It also includes the experience of the primitive Church, the teachings of early Fathers and Ecumenical Councils, the lives of Christian saints and martyrs, the liturgy, the sacraments, and the entirety of spiritual and mystical experience, transmitted from generation to generation. In other words, Tradition in Orthodox understanding means the continuity of theological teaching and spiritual experience within the Church from Old Testament times up to the present.

It is absolutely essential for a Christian to be a member of the Church, to be connected with the revelation of God which is preserved in the Church's sacred Tradition, in its living memory. The experience of God is what is given to individuals, but the revelation of God belongs to the whole body of the Church. The personal experience of each individual believer is to be incorporated into the collective memory of the Church. Every person is called to share his experience with others, and to examine it against the revelation which is given to people as a body, as a community. In this way the Christian becomes united with other Christians and the house of the Church is formed from individual stones.

THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE CHURCH

The words of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, 'I believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church', define the Church as a divine-human organism.

The Church is one, for she is constituted in the image of the Holy Trinity and reveals the mystery of unity in essence, while being differentiated in hypostases: she consists of a multitude of separate hypostatic persons welded together by unity in the faith and in the sacraments. As St Paul says, 'There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all' (Eph.4:4-6). It was for the same unity among Christians that Jesus Christ prayed at the Last Supper: 'Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou has given me, that they may be one... I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us' (John 17:11-21).

St Paul speaks of the holiness of the Church by comparing Christ with a bridegroom and the Church with his bride: 'Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her... that He might present the Church to Himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish' (Eph.5:25-27). The sanctity of the Church is conditioned not by Christ's holiness as her head, but by the holiness to which all of her members are called. The

apostles in their epistles refer to Christians as 'the saints', thereby suggesting that holiness is not an unattainable ideal but the norm for the Church's members. Every Christian is called to holiness and throughout the Church's history there have been true saints; however, saints who have managed to transcend sin and the passions are very few. The majority of Christians are sinners who are members of the Church not by virtue of a holiness attained, but by virtue of their striving for this holiness and their repentance. The Church's task is to sanctify them and lead them to God. In this sense it is said of Christians that they are in patria et in via - in the homeland and on the way, that is, simultaneously within the Church and yet on the way towards her.

The word Catholic (Greek katholike) means 'universal', uniting Christians dispersed around the world, and including the saints and the departed. St Cyril of Jerusalem says that 'the Church is called Catholic because she universally and unremittingly teaches all that ought to be a part of human knowledge - the dogma of the visible and the invisible, the heavenly and the earthly...' At first, the Church was a tiny community consisting of the disciples of Christ in Jerusalem. By the end of the first century, however, due to the preaching of the apostles, communities had been formed in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus and in other towns of Europe, Asia and Africa. All of these communities, each headed by its own bishop, comprised a single 'universal' Church with Christ as the head.

The apostolicity of the Church is derived from the fact that it was founded by the apostles, preserves the truth of their teaching, receives succession from them and continues their mission on earth. That the Church is 'built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets' is stated by St Paul (Eph.2:20). By apostolic succession we mean the unbroken chain of ordinations (episcopal consecrations) going back to the apostles and coming down to present-day bishops: the apostles ordained the first generation of bishops, who in turn ordained the second generation, and so on down to our times. Christian communities whose succession has been broken are considered to have fallen away from the Church until their apostolic succession is restored. The bishops continue the apostles' mission on earth - a mission of ministry, preaching, the guidance of existing church communities and the creation of new ones.

Not only the bishops and priests, but every member of the Church is called to an apostolic, missionary service, to preach Christ in word and deed: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt.28:19). This mission, which was laid by Christ upon the apostles and their successors, is at present far from complete. There are on earth whole nations which have barely been touched by the preaching of Christ, vast areas where the word of the Gospel has yet to be heard fully. Some countries that were once Christian have now returned to paganism and unbelief and require a new preaching of the Gospel, new apostles.

THE CHURCH HIERARCHY

From apostolic times there existed in the Church a hierarchical priesthood: certain men chosen to celebrate the Eucharist and lead the people. The Book of the Acts (6:6) speaks of the election of seven deacons (Greek diakonos, 'servant', or 'minister') and

their being set aside to serve. The apostles founded Christian communities in the various cities of the Roman Empire where they preached and ordained bishops and presbyters to lead these communities.

The three-fold hierarchy of bishops, presbyters and deacons has existed in the Church from a very early time, though probably not from the first century. In the letters of the apostles we cannot see any clear distinction between bishop and presbyter - both terms are used most often as synonyms: ‘This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective, and appoint elders (presbyters) in every town as I directed you, if any man is blameless, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers... For a bishop, as God’s steward, must be blameless’ (1 Tim.1:5-7). In apostolic times there was still no distinction between diocese and parish: the church community, whether it was in Crete, Ephesus or Rome, incorporated all the faithful of that city or country and was a ‘local’ Church (that is, a Church of that locality).

But as the Church expanded there arose a need for senior presbyters in charge of communities in a single province and possessing the right to ordain presbyters for these communities. As early as the second century St Ignatius clearly refers to the bishop as the head of the Church and the presbyters as his concelebrants, of one mind as him and in subjection to him: ‘The presbyters are in harmony with the bishop as the strings of a lyre’. In subjecting themselves to the bishop, the presbyters are subjecting themselves to Christ in his person. For St Ignatius the bishop embodies the plenitude of the Church. To be out of harmony with the bishop is to break away from the Church. The three-fold hierarchy has to be treated with greatest respect on the part of the faithful: ‘All must respect the deacons as Christ’s commandments and the bishops as Jesus Christ Himself... the presbyters are to be respected as the assembly of God, as the host of angels. Without them there is no Church’.

The Church teaches that the moral imperfection of the celebrant in no way affects the validity of the sacraments, for when the priest celebrates the services he is but an instrument of God. It is Christ Himself Who baptizes people, it is He Who offers the Eucharist and communicates the people, it is He Who in the sacrament of confession absolves sins. In the rite of confession the priest says to the penitent, ‘Behold, Christ stands here invisibly and receives your confession.. and I am but a witness, bearing testimony before Him of all things which you have said to me’. However, if Christ in His infinite mercy tolerates sinful servants of the Church as He tolerated Judas among the apostles, this in no way justifies those ministers of the Church who are unworthy of their vocation. The moral imperfection of priesthood and the sins and vices of the clergy have always been an illness and a bane to the Church. They undermine the authority of the Church in the eyes of the people and destroy their faith in God, even though they do not affect the validity of the sacraments. God is above all judged by the actions of His servants, for they are the image of Christ in the Church. It is indeed demoralizing for one to see in a priest indifference instead of compassion, disdain instead of love, depravity instead of moral purity, hypocrisy instead of sincerity. A priest carries on his chest a Cross bearing an image of Christ crucified for humanity. He is therefore expected to show the same compassion and love as Christ Himself showed. ‘Set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity’, says St Paul to the newly-ordained Timothy.

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

Throughout the entire history of the Church only men have been permitted to serve as priests and bishops. This is not a tradition that merely stems from the inequality between men and women in the ancient world. From the very beginning priesthood has been a service of spiritual fatherhood. A woman can be a mother, wife or daughter, but she cannot be a father. And while motherhood is not inferior to fatherhood, its mission, service and vocation are different. Only a child knows what distinguishes fatherhood from motherhood even though he cannot express it in words. The difference between spiritual fatherhood, and any other form of service is known to every Christian who has a spiritual father. The Orthodox Church takes a negative view of the recent introduction of women priesthood in some Protestant communities. This is not simply because Orthodoxy is traditional and conservative, neither does Orthodoxy wish to denigrate women or consider them lower than men. It is because Orthodoxy, taking fatherhood in the Church very seriously, does not want it to vanish by entrusting to women a service alien to them. Within the Church's organism every member carries out particular functions and is irreplaceable. There is no substitute for fatherhood and if the Church were to lose it she would be deprived of her integrity and fullness by becoming a family without a father or an organism without all of its necessary members.

It is in this sense that we can understand the Christian attitude toward marriage and the role of the woman in the family. The Christian family is a 'small church' created in the image of Christ's Church. According to apostolic teaching, it is the husband, not the wife, who is the head of the family. However, the headship of the man does not entail inequality. The power of the man is the same power of love as Christ's power in the Church: 'As the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her... Let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects the husband' (Eph.5:24-25; 33). The headship of the husband is his readiness to sacrifice himself in the same way as Christ loves the Church. As head of the family the husband must love and respect his wife: 'Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honour on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life' (1 Peter 3:7). It is not inequality, but a harmonious unity that retains different functions which should exist in both family and the Church. For if the family is a domestic Church, then the Church is a large family.

The fatherhood of the priest is not limited by his function as head and guide of the community. In fact, leadership of the community is sometimes entrusted to a woman. For example, Orthodox convents are always under the guidance of an abbess who directs not only the nuns but also the priests who serve the convent. In the convents of the Byzantine era there were female elders who had the right to hear the nuns' confessions. Even the sacrament of Baptism in special circumstances can be carried out validly and legally by a woman, for example, if the candidate is on the verge of death and there is no priest at hand.

However, there are no instances in Church history when women served the Liturgy or ordained priests, as now is the case in some Protestant communities. The priest celebrating the Eucharist symbolizes Christ, God who has become man, a male. The

Church attaches great importance to liturgical symbolism: in the Orthodox understanding of symbolism, between the symbol and the reality there is a direct interdependence so that, should the symbol be changed, there is a change of the reality which stands behind it.

There were, however, in the early Church deaconesses with a wide range of obligations. For example, they helped the bishop perform the sacrament of Baptism and took part in the celebration of the Eucharist. The question of whether to restore the institution of deaconesses is now open for discussion in the entire Orthodox Church. It can be answered positively by a Pan-Orthodox Council, if such a Council would ever be convened. In actual fact, many important and irreplaceable services within the Church akin to those of deaconesses in the early Church are carried out by women today: they bake the bread for the Eucharist, read and sing in church and quite often direct the choir.

THE MOTHER OF GOD AND THE SAINTS

We can judge the Church's attitude towards women by the high position accorded to the Most Holy Mother of God. The Church glorifies Her more than all of the saints and even more than the angels. She is praised in hymns as 'more honourable than the Cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim'. The Holy Virgin is the Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church - it is in Her person that the Church glorifies motherhood. Motherhood is an integral part of woman's dignity and it may be noted that those Protestant churches that have entrusted to women the celebration of the Eucharist and other priestly functions neither venerate the Mother of God nor pray to Her. Yet the church community deprived of the Mother of God loses its fullness in the same way that a community deprived of the priesthood is not a complete Church. If fatherhood is realized in the person of the hierarchy - the episcopate and the priesthood - then motherhood is personified in the Church in the Most Holy Mother of God.

The Orthodox Church glorifies the Mother of God as Ever-Virgin (aeiparthenos). This term was upheld by the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 533 and emphasizes the virginity of the Mother of God before, during and after Christ's Birth. She is also called Most Holy, Most Pure and Immaculate. The Orthodox Church follows early church tradition in believing that the Holy Virgin after Her death rose again on the third day and was assumed bodily into heaven like Christ and the Old Testament saints Enoch and Elijah.

Very little is said in Holy Scripture about the Holy Virgin: her place in the New Testament is very modest, especially if we compare it with the place she occupies in the life of the Church. The veneration of the Mother of God in the Orthodox Church is based not so much on Scripture as on a centuries-old experience of many people to whom, in one way or another, the mystery of the Holy Virgin was revelaed.

The Mother of God stands at the head of the host of saints glorified by the Church. The veneration of the saints and prayers addressed to them is an ancient tradition of the Church preserved from apostolic times. Accusations that the Church worships people on the same level as God, thereby breaking the commandment 'You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve', are unjust. Greek theology makes a clear distinction between worship (latreia) of God and veneration (proskynesis) of the

saints. The latter are venerated not as gods, but as people who have attained a spiritual height and who have become united with God. The saints are closely connected with each other and with Christ. In venerating the saints we venerate Christ, Who lives in them.

Official numbering among the saints, or canonization, is a comparatively late phenomenon: there were no acts of canonization or glorification in the early Christian Church. A martyr who suffered for Christ soon after his death would become the object of reverential veneration by believers; they would pray to him and would celebrate the Liturgy on his tomb. To this very day there is a rule in the Orthodox Church whereby the Liturgy is celebrated on the relics of the martyr or a saint. This emphasizes the link between the Church on earth today, made up of living people, and the Church triumphant in heaven, made up of saints glorified by God. It also shows how the martyrs are the basis and foundation of the Church. 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity', said Tertullian.

The veneration of a particular saint is not a result of the act of canonization. Actually, the reverse is true: canonization comes as a result of the popular veneration of a saint. There are saints about whose lives almost nothing is known, and yet their veneration is universal. A good example is St Nicholas, Archbishop of Myra in Lycia (the fourth century). He is glorified by Christians of both the Eastern and Western Churches, he is loved by both children and adults (Christmas holidays in the West would be unthinkable without Santa Claus visiting the home and bringing presents). Even non-Christians who pray to St Nicholas receive help from him. This universal veneration of the saint is rooted in the experience of many generations of people: he became the 'personal friend' of those thousands of individuals whom he has helped and whom he has saved from death.

Some people find it difficult to understand why it is necessary to pray to the saints when there is Christ. Yet the saints are not so much mediators between us and Christ: rather, they are our heavenly friends, able to hear to us and help us through their prayers. Someone who has no friends in heaven cannot properly understand this reverential veneration which surrounds the saints in the Orthodox Church. It has to be said, therefore, that those Christian communities which have no direct and living communion with the saints, cannot fully experience the completeness of the Church as the mystical Body of Christ uniting the living and the dead, saints and sinners.

THE HOLY ICONS

In the Orthodox tradition the icon is not merely an adornment in the church building or an object to be used in worship: people pray before it, they kiss it and treat it as a sacred object.

In spite of the existence of icons from distant antiquity there have at various times been tendencies opposed to the veneration of icons. In the seventh and eighth centuries these tendencies culminated in the iconoclast heresy that was condemned at the Seventh Ecumenical Council. The perennial accusation of the iconoclasts against the venerators of icons was that of idolatry. The basic argument was the Old Testament prohibition to depicting God: 'You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water

under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God' (Ex.20:4-5). It is obvious, however, that the words quoted are directed at the idols of pagan peoples who worshipped them.

The New Testament is the revelation of God Who became man and Who could be seen by people. That which is invisible cannot be depicted in images, while that which is visible can be depicted as it is no longer the product of fantasy, but a reality. St John of Damascus presents us with the notion that the Old Testament prohibition of depicting the invisible God points towards the possibility of depicting Him when He becomes visible: 'It is obvious that when you contemplate God becoming man, then you may depict Him clothed in human form. When the invisible One becomes visible to flesh, you may then draw His likeness... Use every kind of drawing, word, or colour'.

The iconoclast heresy of the eighth century was a continuation of the Christological heresies discussed at earlier Ecumenical Councils. The defense of icons became a defense of the belief in the Incarnation of Christ, for iconoclasm was one of the ways of denying the reality of this Incarnation. For the Orthodox, the icon is not an idol substituting the invisible God, but a symbol and sign of His presence in the Church. The Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council concurred with St Basil the Great in saying that 'the honour rendered to the image goes over to the Prototype'. The Council insisted that, in bowing down to the icon, the Christian does not worship wood and colours, but the one depicted on wood - Christ, the Holy Virgin, the saints. There is therefore nothing in common between idolatry and the veneration of icons. The icon is not something standing before the human person as a sole and self-sufficient object for worship. It is not even something placed between the person and God. To use the expression of Fr Paul Florensky, the icon is a window onto the other world: through the icon the human person comes into direct contact with the spiritual world and those who live there.

THE CROSS

The Holy Cross has particular significance for the Church. An instrument of death, it has become the instrument of salvation. St Basil the Great identifies the 'sign of the Son of man' mentioned by Christ in connection with His Second Coming (Matt.24:30) with the arms of the Cross pointing towards the four ends of the universe. The Cross is a symbol of Christ Himself and is infused with miraculous power. The Orthodox Church believes that Christ's energy is present in the Cross. Therefore Christians not only make crosses and place them on the same level as icons in churches; they also wear crosses on their chests, make the sign of the Cross over themselves and bless each other with the sign of the Cross. They even address the Cross as something capable of hearing them: 'Rejoice, life-bearing Cross', 'O most honourable and life-creating Cross of the Lord'.

The Church knows about the miraculous, salvific and healing power of the Cross and of the sign of the Cross from her centuries-old experience. The Cross protects a person travelling, working, sleeping, praying. Indeed in all places, through the sign of the Cross, Christ's blessing comes down upon every good deed which we undertake: 'The Cross is the protector of the whole world, the Cross is the beauty of the Church, the Cross

is the power of kings, the Cross is the foundation of the faithful, the Cross is the glory of the angels and the sore of the demons', sings the Church at festivals of the Cross.

The teaching on the Holy Cross as a symbol of divine dispensation and as an object of religious veneration is expounded by St Isaac the Syrian in one of his newly-discovered works. According to St Isaac, the power in the Cross does not differ from that through which the worlds came into being and which governs the whole creation in accordance with the will of God. In the Cross, the very same power lives that lived in the Ark of the Covenant, itself surrounded by fearful veneration on the part of the people of Israel. The Ark was venerated, he answers, because in it the invisible Shekhina (Presence) of God dwelt. The very same Shekhina is now residing in the Cross: it has departed from the Old Testament Ark and entered the New Testament Cross.

The material Cross, whose type was the Ark of the Covenant, is, in turn, the type of the eschatological Kingdom of Christ, states St Isaac. The Cross, as it were, links the Old Testament with the New, and the New Testament with the age to come, where all material symbols and types will be abolished.

CHURCH TIME

The Church exists on earth, yet at the same time she is turned towards heaven; the Church lives in time, yet breathes eternity. This experience of communion with eternity forms the basis of the church calendar and the cycle of worship throughout the year, week and day. It is in the year that the Church recollects and experiences the whole history of the world and the human person, the entire 'economy' of the salvation of the human race. In the yearly cycle of feasts there passes before us the life of Christ from His Nativity to His Crucifixion and Resurrection; the life of the Mother of God from her Conception to her Dormition; and the lives of the saints glorified by the Church. In the scope of a week and of a single day the entire history of the salvation of the human race is also renewed and recollected in worship. Each cycle has its centre towards which it is directed: the centre of the daily cycle is the Eucharist, the centre of the weekly cycle is Sunday and the centre of the annual cycle of celebrations is Christ's Resurrection, Easter.

The Resurrection of Christ is the main and defining event in the history of the Christian faith: 'If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain' (1 Cor.15:14). If Christ had not risen, Christianity would have remained but one of the many moral teachings and religious outlooks alongside Buddhism or Islam. Christ's Resurrection instituted the Church as a new life, a new divine-human existence in which the human person becomes god because God has become a human person. From the very beginning of the Church's existence the feast of Christ's Resurrection became the foundation stone of the Christian calendar.

The feast days of the Church are not merely recollections of events happening in the distant past: they make us part of the spiritual reality behind them, which has a timeless and fixed significance for all of us. Each Christian receives Christ as his personal Saviour, Who became incarnate for him personally. Therefore all the events of Christ's life become the personal experience of every Christian. The feast day is a contemporary actualization of an event that occurred once in time but it is forever happening outside of time. At the feast of the Nativity we hear in church, 'Today Christ is

born in Bethlehem'; at Epiphany, 'Today the nature of the waters is sanctified'; and at Easter, 'Today Christ has trampled down death and risen from the tomb'. If people not of the Church live with reminiscences of an already irretrievable past or hope in an unknown future, in the Church they are called upon to live by the ever-present 'today', which is the reality of everyday communion with God.

The feast of Christ's Resurrection, while it occurs only once a year, penetrates the entire church year. The radiance of Easter is reflected in the whole cycle of worship. Easter is not simply a calendar date. For the Christian, Easter is always present as a communion with the risen Christ. St Seraphim of Sarov throughout the whole year met all who approached him with the Paschal greeting, 'Christ is risen!' It is said of a hermit of old, who abided in unceasing prayer and was famed for his sanctity, that when a disciple came to him with some food and said, 'Elder, today is Easter!', answered in reply, 'Is it really?' Of course, neither St Seraphim, for whom everyday was Easter, nor the hermit who did not know its precise date, denied the church calendar, yet they lived by their experience of eternity and knew that Easter was not a single day of the year, but an eternal reality of which they partook daily.

The yearly cycle of feast days is, as it were, a reflection of eternity in time. Church time is an icon of the eternity. As in an icon a timeless spiritual reality is reflected in material colours, so in the church calendar the realities of eternal life are reflected in the dates of the secular calendar. As an icon encompasses the energy and presence of the one depicted on it, so church time is full of eternal energy and of the presence of Christ, the Mother of God, the angels and saints, whose memories are commemorated throughout the year.

THE CHURCH AND CHURCHES: DIVISIONS AND RECONCILIATION

The Nicene-Constantinople Creed speaks of one Church. Yet there are many Christian confessions in the world that call themselves churches. It is not uncommon for these confessions to refuse each other Holy Communion and even to be mutually hostile. Do these things destroy the unity of the Church? Is it not the case that a formerly single Church has disintegrated into various denominations and lost its unity?

To begin with, it should be pointed out that according to Orthodox ecclesiology the Church by her very nature is indivisible and will remain so until the end of the age. The divisions and schisms resulting from heresy did not entail the dismembering of the Church, but rather the falling away of heretics from the single organism of the Church and the loss of communion with her. As mentioned above, heresy is characterized by the way it consciously opposes universal church doctrine.

Orthodoxy does not concur with the 'branch theory', according to which all the existing Christian denominations are branches of the one tree. The unity of the Church is conditioned by unity around the Eucharist: outside of eucharistic communion there can be no unity. We pray at the Liturgy of St Basil the Great, 'And unite all of us to one another who become partakers of the one Bread and Cup in the communion of the Holy Spirit'. Belonging to the Church is expressed not only in being in dogmatic unity with her, but also in the unity of the Eucharist. It is precisely as dismembered branches that the Church

regards those Christian groups who have opposed accepted church teaching through heresy.

Does this necessarily mean that the Orthodox should regard all non-Orthodox Christian confessions as heretical gatherings or withered branches cut off from the trunk? For some Orthodox theologians this is certainly the case. Yet the official position of most Orthodox Churches is, as a rule, much more open towards other Christian confessions, especially those whose ecclesiology is identical or close to that of the Orthodox: the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox (pre-Chalcedonian) Churches.

The early Church took a strict line with heretics: the church canons not only forbid them from taking part in the Eucharist, but also forbid people from praying with heretics. However, we must remember that the heresies of the first Christian centuries (Arianism, Sabellianism, and Eutychian Monophysitism) rejected the very foundations of the Christian faith: the Divinity of Christ, the equality of the Persons of the Trinity, the fulness of the divine and human natures of Christ. This cannot be said of the majority of today's Christian confessions for they accept the basic dogmas of the Church. Orthodox Christians, therefore, ought to make a distinction between non-Orthodoxy and heresy. St Philaret of Moscow believed that placing Catholicism and Arianism on an equal footing is 'both rigorous and counterproductive'. Even more counterproductive is applying what was said by the Ecumenical Councils on the excommunication of heretics to contemporary non-Orthodox Christians.

When dealing with the difficult question of Christian divisions, the Orthodox may wish to bear in mind that God alone knows where the limits of the Church are. As St Augustine said, 'many of those who on earth considered themselves to be alien to the Church will find that on the day of Judgment that they are her citizen; and many of those who thought themselves to be members of the Church will, alas, be found to be alien to her'. To declare that outside of the Orthodox Church there is not and cannot be the grace of God would be to limit God's omnipotence, to confine Him to a framework outside of which He has no right to act.

A LIFE IN THE SACRAMENTS

Orthodox theology regards the sacraments as sacred actions through which the encounter between God and the human person takes place. In them our union with God, in so far as it is possible in this earthly life, is realized; the grace of God comes down upon us and sanctifies our entire nature, both soul and body. The sacraments bring us into Communion with the Divine nature, animating, deifying and restoring us to life eternal. In the sacraments we experience heaven and a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, that Kingdom which we can only ever become fully a part of, enter into and live in, after our death.

The Greek word mysterion ('sacrament' or 'mystery') comes from the verb myo ('to cover', 'to conceal'). This word was invested with a broader meaning by the church Fathers: the incarnation of Christ was called a 'sacrament', His salvific ministry, His birth, death, Resurrection and other events of His life, the Christian faith itself, doctrine, dogma, worship, prayer, church feast days, the sacred symbols, and so on. Of the sacred actions, Baptism and the Eucharist were preeminently named sacraments. Dionysius the

Areopagite spoke of three sacraments: Baptism, Chrismation and the Eucharist; while the rites of clerical consecration, tonsuring a monk and burial were also listed among the sacraments. Following the same order, St Theodore the Studite (ninth century) referred to six sacraments: Illumination (Baptism), the Synaxis (Eucharist), Chrismation, Priesthood, monastic tonsuring and the burial rite. St Gregory Palamas (fourteenth century) emphasized the central place of the two sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, while St Nicholas Cabasilas (fifteenth century) in his book The Life in Christ provides commentaries on the three sacraments: Baptism, Chrismation and the Eucharist.

At present the Orthodox Church regards Baptism, the Eucharist, Chrismation, Penance, Holy Unction, Marriage and Priesthood as sacraments; all the other sacred actions are listed as rituals. However, it ought to be borne in mind that the practice of numbering the sacraments has been borrowed from Latin scholasticism; hence also the distinction made between 'sacraments' and 'rituals'. Eastern patristic thought in the first millenium was unconcerned about the number of sacraments and never felt the need to enumerate them.

In each sacrament there are both visible and invisible aspects. The former consists of the rite, that is, the words and actions of the participants, and the 'material substance' of the sacrament (water in Baptism, bread and wine in the Eucharist). The latter is in fact the spiritual transfiguration and rebirth of the person for whose sake the rite is accomplished. It is primarily this invisible aspect, hidden to sight and hearing, beyond the mind and beyond sensible perception, that is the 'mystery'. In the sacrament, however, the human person's body is also transfigured and revived along with the soul. The sacrament is not only a spiritual, but also a bodily Communion with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The human person enters the divine mystery with his whole being, his soul and body become immersed in God, for the body too is destined for salvation and deification. It is in this sense that we understand immersion in water, anointing with holy oil and myrrh in Baptism, the tasting of bread and wine in the Eucharist. In the age to come the 'material substance' of the sacrament will no longer be necessary, and the human person will no longer partake of the Body and Blood of Christ in the form of bread and wine. Rather, he will communicate with Christ directly. 'Grant that we may more truly have communion with Thee in the day of Thy Kingdom which knoweth no eventide', prays the Church.

The author of all the sacraments is God Himself. It is not therefore the priest, but God Himself Who performs each sacrament. As St Ambrose of Milan says, 'It is not Damasius, or Peter, or Ambrose or Gregory who baptizes. We are fulfilling our ministry as servants, but the validity of the sacraments depends upon You. It is not within human power to communicate the divine benefits - it is Your gift, O Lord'.

BAPTISM

The sacrament of Baptism is the door into the Church, the Kingdom of grace. It is with Baptism that Christian life begins. Baptism is the frontier that separates the members of Christ's Body from those who are outside it. In Baptism the human person is arrayed in Christ, following the words of St Paul which are sung as the newly-baptized is led around the baptismal font: 'For as many of you who were baptized into Christ have put

on Christ' (Gal.3:27). In Baptism the human person dies to his sinful life and rises again to new spiritual life.

The sacrament of Baptism was instituted by Christ Himself: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt.28:19). Christ's commandment already contains the basic elements of the baptismal rite: preliminary teaching ('catechization'), without which the adoption of faith cannot be conscious; immersion in water (Greek baptismos, literally 'immersion'); and the formula 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. In the early Church Baptism was accomplished through complete immersion in water. However, at an early date special pools (baptisteries) were built and into these the candidates for baptism were plunged. The practice of pouring water over the person or sprinkling him with water existed in the early Church, though not quite as a norm.

At the time of Constantine (fourth century) adult baptism was more common than the baptism of infants, the emphasis being laid on the conscious acceptance of the sacrament. Some postponed the sacrament until the end of their life in the knowledge that sins were forgiven in Baptism. The Emperor Constantine was baptized just before his death. St Gregory the Theologian, a son of a bishop, was baptized only when he reached maturity. Saints Basil the Great and John Chrysostom were baptized only after completing their higher education.

However, the practice of baptizing infants is no less ancient - the apostles baptized whole families which might well have included children (cf/ Acts 10:48). St Irenaeus of Lyons (second century) says: 'Christ came to save those who through Him are reborn into God: infants, children, adolescents and the elderly'. Origen in the third century calls the custom of baptizing infants an 'apostolic tradition'. The local Council of Carthage (third century) pronounced an anathema upon those who rejected the necessity of baptizing infants and newly-born children.

The sacrament of Baptism, like all other sacraments, must be received consciously. Christian faith is the prerequisite for the validity of the sacrament. If an infant is baptized, the confession of faith is solemnly pronounced by his godparents, who thereby are obliged to bring the child up in the faith and make his Baptism conscious. An infant who receives the sacrament cannot rationally understand what is happening to him, yet his soul is fully capable of receiving the grace of the Holy Spirit. 'I believe', writes St Symeon the New Theologian, 'that baptized infants are sanctified and are preserved under the wing of the All-Holy Spirit and that they are lambs of the spiritual flock of Christ and chosen lambs, for they have been imprinted with the sign of the life-giving Cross and freed completely from the tyranny of the devil'. The grace of God is given to infants as a pledge of their future belief, as a seed cast into the earth: for the seed to grow into a tree and bring forth fruit, the efforts both of the godparents and of the one baptized as he grows are needed.

Immediately after Baptism or in the days that follow, the newly-baptized, irrespective of age, receives Holy Communion. In the Roman Catholic Church Chrismation (Confirmation) and First Communion take place after the child has reached the age of seven, but the Orthodox Church admits children to these sacraments as early as possible. The understanding behind this practice is that children ought not to be deprived of a living, even if not a fully conscious, contact with Christ.

The sacrament of Baptism occurs only once in a person's life. In Baptism the human person is granted freedom from original sin and forgiveness of all his personal transgressions. However, Baptism is only the first step in the human person's ascent towards God. If it is not accompanied by a renewal of one's entire life and a spiritual regeneration, it might be fruitless. The grace of God, received in Baptism as a pledge or as a seed, will grow within the person and be made manifest throughout his whole life so long as he strives towards Christ, lives in the Church and fulfills God's commandments.

CHRISMATION

The sacrament of Chrismation was established in apostolic times. In the early Church every newly-baptized Christian received a blessing and the gift of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands by an apostle or a bishop. The Book of Acts relates how Peter and John laid hands on women from Samaria so that they could receive the Holy Spirit, 'for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus' (Acts 8:16). In apostolic times, the descent of the Holy Spirit was occasionally accompanied by visible and tangible manifestations of grace: like the apostles at Pentecost, people would begin to speak in unfamiliar tongues, to prophesy and work miracles.

The laying on of hands was a continuation of Pentecost in that it communicated the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In later times, by virtue of the increased number of Christians, it was impossible for everyone to meet a bishop; so the laying on of hands was substituted by Chrismation. In the Orthodox Church Chrismation is administered by a priest, yet the myrrh is prepared by a bishop. Myrrh is boiled from various elements. In contemporary practice only the head of an autocephalous Church (the Patriarch, Metropolitan or Archbishop) has the right to consecrate myrrh, thus conveying the episcopal blessing to all those who become members of the Church.

In the Epistles the gift of the Holy Spirit is sometimes called 'anointing' (1 John 2:20; 2 Cor.1:21). In the Old Testament kings were appointed to their realm through anointing. Ordination to the priestly ministry was also performed through chrismation. However, in the New Testament there is no division between the 'consecrated' and the 'others': in Christ's Kingdom all are 'kings and priests' (Rev.1:6); a 'chosen race'; 'God's own people' (1 Peter 2:9); therefore anointing is given to every Christian.

Through anointing we receive the 'seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit'. As Fr Alexander Schmemann explains, this is not the same as the various 'gifts' of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit Himself, Who is communicated to the person as a gift. Christ spoke of this gift to the disciples at the Last Supper: 'And I will pray to the Father, and He will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth' (John 14:16-17). He also said about the Spirit: 'It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you' (John 16:7). Christ's death on the Cross made possible the granting to us of the Holy Spirit. And it is in Christ that we become kings, priests and 'christs' (anointed ones), receiving neither the Old Testament priesthood of Aaron, nor the kingdom of Saul, nor the anointing of David, but the New Testament priesthood and the kingdom of Christ.

Through Chrismation we become sons of God, for the Holy Spirit is the 'grace of adoption as sons'.

As with the grace of baptism, the gift of the Holy Spirit, received in Chrismation, is not to be passively accepted, but actively assimilated. It was in this sense that St Seraphim of Sarov said that the goal of a Christian's life is the 'acquisition of the Holy Spirit'. The Divine Spirit is given to us a pledge, yet we still have to acquire Him, make Him our own. The Holy Spirit is to bring forth fruit in us. 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control... If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit' (Gal.5:22; 25). All of the sacraments have meaning and are for our salvation only when the life of the Christian is in harmony with the gift he has received.

THE EUCHARIST

The Eucharist (Greek eucharistia, 'thanksgiving'), or the sacrament of Holy Communion, is 'the sacrament of sacraments', 'the mystery of mysteries'. The Eucharist has a central significance in the life of the Church and of every Christian. It is not merely one of many sacred actions or 'a means of receiving grace': it is the very heart of the Church, her foundation, without which the existence of the Church cannot be imagined.

The sacrament of the Eucharist was instituted by Christ at the Last Supper. The Last Supper of Christ with the disciples was, in its outward ritual, the traditional Jewish Paschal meal when the members of every family in Israel gathered to taste of the sacrificial lamb. This Supper was attended by Christ's disciples: not His relatives in the flesh, but that family which would later grow into the Church. Instead of the lamb, Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice 'like that of a lamb without blemish or spot', 'He was destined before the foundation of the world' for the salvation of people (1 Peter 1:19-20). At the Last Supper Christ transformed the bread and wine into His Body and Blood, communicated the apostles and commanded them to celebrate this sacrament in remembrance of Him. After His death on the Cross and His Resurrection the disciples would gather on the first day of the week (the so called 'day of the sun', or Sunday) for the 'breaking of bread'.

Originally the Eucharist was a meal accompanied by readings from Scripture, a sermon and prayer. It would sometimes continue through the night. Gradually, as the Christian communities grew, the Eucharist was transformed from an evening supper to a divine service.

The most ancient elements that constitute the Eucharistic rite are the reading from Holy Scripture, prayers for all of the people, the kiss of peace, thanksgiving to the Father (to which the people reply 'Amen'), the fraction (breaking of bread), and Communion. In the early Church each community had its own Eucharist, but all of these elements were present in every eucharistic rite. The bishop's prayer was originally improvised and only later were the eucharistic prayers written down. In the early Church a multitude of eucharistic rites were used: they were called 'Liturgies' (Greek leitourgia means 'common action', 'work', 'service').

The eucharistic offering has the sense of a sacrifice in which Christ Himself is 'the Offerer and the Offered, the Receiver and the Received'. Christ is the one true

celebrant of the Eucharist: He is invisibly present in the church and acts through the priest. For Orthodox Christians the Eucharist is not merely a symbolic action performed in remembrance of the Mystical Supper; it is rather the Mystical Supper itself, renewed daily by Christ and continuing uninterruptedly in the Church from that Paschal night when Christ reclined at the table with His disciples. 'Of Thy Mystical Supper, O Son of God, accept me this day as a partaker', says the believer as he approaches Holy Communion.

The Orthodox Church believes that in the Eucharist the bread and wine become not only a symbol of Christ's presence, but the real Body and Blood of Christ. This belief has been held in the Christian Church from the very beginning. Christ Himself says: 'For My Flesh is food indeed, and My Blood is drink indeed. He who eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood abides in Me, and I in him' (John 6:55-56).

The union of the believer with Christ in the Eucharist is not symbolic and figurative, but genuine, real and integral. As Christ suffuses the bread and wine with Himself, filling them with His divine presence, so He enters into the human person, filling his flesh and blood with His life-giving presence and divine energy. In the Eucharist we become of the same body with Christ, Who enters us as He entered the womb of the Virgin Mary. Our flesh in the Eucharist receives a leaven of incorruption, it becomes deified, and when it dies and becomes subject to corruption, this leaven becomes the pledge of its future resurrection.

Because of the Eucharist's uniqueness the Church attaches to it a special significance in the cause of the salvation of humanity. Beyond the Eucharist there can be no salvation, no deification, no true life, no resurrection in eternity: 'Unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of man and drink His Blood, you have no life in you; he who eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day' (John 6:53-54). Hence the church Fathers advise Christians never to decline the Eucharist and to take Communion as often as possible. 'Endeavour to gather more often for the Eucharist and the glorification of God', says St Ignatius of Antioch. The words from the Lord's prayer 'Give us this day our daily bread' (Matt.6:11) were sometimes interpreted as a call to daily reception of the Eucharist.

The Church reminds us that all those who approach Holy Communion must be ready to encounter Christ. Hence the necessity of proper preparation, which should not be limited to the reading of a certain number of prayers and abstinence from particular types of food. In the first instance readiness for Communion is conditioned by a pure conscience, the absence of enmity towards our neighbours or a grievance against anyone, by peace in our relationships with all people. Obstacles to Communion are particular grave sins committed by a person who should repent of them in confession.

The contrition that comes from a sense of one's own sinfulness is a necessary condition for Communion. This does not, however, prevent the Christian from receiving the Eucharist as a celebration of joy and thanksgiving. By its very nature the Eucharist is a solemn thanksgiving, fundamental to which is praise of God. Herein lies the paradox and mystery of the Eucharist: it has to be approached with both repentance and joy. With repentance from a sense of one's unworthiness, and with joy at the fact that the Lord in the Eucharist cleanses, sanctifies and deifies the human person, renders him worthy in spite of his unworthiness. In the Eucharist not only the bread and wine are transformed

into the Body and Blood of Christ, but also the communicant himself is transformed from an old into a new person; he is freed from the burden of sin and illumined by divine light.

PENANCE

‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Matt.3:2). With these words, first uttered by St John the Baptist, Jesus Christ began His own mission (Matt.4:17). Christianity was from the very beginning a call to repentance, to conversion, to a ‘change of mind’ (metanoia). A radical transformation of one’s entire way of life and thought, a renovation of the mind and senses, a rejection of sinful deeds and thoughts, a transfiguration of the human person: these are the main elements of Christ’s message.

The pattern for repentance is set by Jesus Christ in his parable of the prodigal son (see Luke 15:11-24). Having lived a sinful life ‘in a far country’, that is, far away from God, the prodigal son, after many tribulations, comes to himself and decides to return to his Father. Repentance begins with his conversion (‘came to himself’), which is then transformed into determination to return (‘I will arise and go’), and finishes with his return to God (‘he arose and came’). This is followed by confession (‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you’), which results in forgiveness (‘Bring quickly the best robe’), adoption (‘this my son’), and spiritual resurrection (‘was dead, and is alive again’). Repentance is therefore a dynamic process, a way towards God, rather than a mere act of recognizing one’s sins.

Every Christian has all of his sins forgiven in the sacrament of Baptism. However, ‘there is no man who shall live and sin not’. Sins committed after Baptism deprive the human person of the fulness of life in God. Hence the necessity of the ‘second Baptism’, the expression use by the church Fathers for repentance, emphasizing its purifying, renovating and sanctifying energy.

The sacrament of Penance is spiritual healing for the soul. Every sin, depending on its gravity, is for the soul either a small injury, a deep wound, sometimes a serious disease, or perhaps even a fatal illness. In order to be spiritually healthy, the human person must regularly visit his father-confessor, a spiritual doctor: ‘Have you sinned? Go to church and repent in your sin... Here is a physician, not a judge. Here nobody is condemned, but everybody receives forgiveness of sins’, says St John Chrysostom.

From the very beginning of Christianity, it was the duty of the apostles, and then of bishops and presbyters, to hear the confessions and to give absolution. Christ said to His apostles: ‘Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven’ (matt.18:18). The power of ‘binding and loosing’, which was given to the apostles and through them to bishops and priests, is manifested in the absolution which the priest gives to the one who repents on behalf of God.

But why is it necessary to confess sins to a priest, a fellow human being? Is it not enough to tell God everything and receive absolution from Him? In order to answer this question, one should be reminded that in the Christian Church a priest is only a ‘witness’ to God’s presence and action: it is not the priest who acts in liturgical celebrations and in the sacraments, but God Himself. The confession of sins is always addressed to God, and

forgiveness is also received from Him. In promoting the idea of confession before a priest, the Church has always taken into account a psychological factor: one might not feel quite as ashamed before God about one's sins, but it is always embarrassing to reveal one's sins before a fellow human being. Moreover, the priest is also a spiritual director, a counselour who can offer advice on how to avoid particular sins in the future. The sacrament of Penance is not limited to a mere confession of sins. It also presupposes recommendations, or sometimes epitimia (penalties) on the part of the priest. It is primarily in the sacrament of Penance that the priest acts in his capacity of spiritual father.

If the penitent deliberately conceals any of his sins, whether out of shame or for any other reason, the sacrament would not be considered valid. Thus, before the beginning of the rite, the priest warns that the confession must be sincere and complete: 'Be not ashamed, neither be afraid, and conceal thou nothing from me... But if thou shalt conceal anything from me, thou shalt have the greater sin'. The forgiveness of sins that is granted after confession is also full and all-inclusive. It is a mistake to believe that only the sins enumerated during confession are forgiven. There are sins which we do not see in ourselves, and there are some, or many, that we simply forget. All these sins are also cleansed by God so long as our confession is sincere. Otherwise total forgiveness would never be possible for anyone, as it is not possible for the human person to know all of his sins or to be a perfect judge of himself.

The importance of frequent confession might be illustrated by the fact that those who come for confession very rarely are usually unable to see their sins and transgressions clearly. Some who come to a priest would say things such as: 'I live like everybody else'; 'I haven't done anything special'; 'I did not kill anyone'; 'There are those who are worse than I am'; and even 'I have no sins'. On the contrary, those who come regularly for confession always find many faults in themselves. They recognize their sins and try to be liberated from them. There is a very simple explanation for this phenomenon. As dust and dirt are seen only where there is light but not in darkness, so someone perceives his sins only when he approaches God, the unapproachable Light. The closer one is to God, the clearer he sees his sins. As long as someone's soul continues to be a camera obscura, his sins remain unrecognized and consequently unhealed.

HOLY UNCTION

The human person was created with an incorruptible and immortal body. After the Fall it lost these qualities and became corruptible and mortal. According to St Gregory the Theologian, the human person 'put on the garment of sin, which is our coarse flesh, and became a body-bearer'. Illness and disease became a part of human life. The root of all infirmity, according to the Church's teaching, is human sinfulness: sin entered the human person in such a way that it polluted not only his soul and intellect, but also his body. If death is a consequence of sin (cf. James 1:15), an illness may be seen as a situation between sin and death: it follows sin and precedes death. It is not, of course, that every particular sin results in a particular illness. The real issue concerns the root of all illness, namely, human corruptibility. As St Symeon the New Theologian remarks, 'doctors cure human bodies... but they can never cure the basic illness of human nature,

its corruptibility. For this reason, when they try different means to cure one particular illness, the body then falls prey to another disease'. Human nature, according to St Symeon, needs a physician who can heal it from its corruptibility, and this physician is Jesus Christ Himself.

During His earthly life Christ healed many people. Before healing someone, He often asked him about his faith: 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' (Matt.9:28) As well as healing the body, Christ also healed the human soul from its most severe disease, unbelief. He also pointed to the Devil as the origin of all illness: of the bent woman He said that she was 'bound by Satan' (see Luke 13:16).

The Church has always considered its own mission as the continuation in all aspects of Jesus Christ's ministry, including healing. Thus, from apostolic times, a sacramental action existed which would later receive the name of Holy Unction. It is found in the New Testament: 'Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders (literally, presbyters) of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven' (James 4:15-16). It is clear that the question here is not of a normal anointing with oil, which in ancient time was used for medical purposes, but of a special sacramental action. Healing qualities are ascribed here not to the oil, but to the 'prayer of faith'; and physician is not a presbyter, but 'the Lord'.

In the modern-day practice of the Orthodox Church, the sacrament of Holy Unction has preserved all the original elements described by St James: it is conducted by seven priests (in practice, often, by three or two), prayers and New Testament passages are read, and the sick person is anointed seven times with blessed oil. The prayer of absolution is read by one of the presbyters at the end of the sacrament. The Church believes that, in accordance with St James's words, the sins of the one who receives Holy Unction are forgiven. This, however, in no way implies that Holy Unction can be regarded as a substitute for confession. Unfounded also is the opinion of some Orthodox believers that in Holy Unction all forgotten sins, that is, those not mentioned at Confession, are forgiven. The sacrament of Confession, as we said above, results in the forgiveness of all sins. The intention behind the sacrament of Holy Unction is not to supplement Confession, but rather to give new strength to the sick with prayers for the healing of body and soul.

Even more misleading is the interpretation of Holy Unction as the 'last anointing' before death. This was the understanding of the sacrament in the Roman Catholic Church before Vatican II, and it still finds its place among Orthodox believers. This is a misinterpretation simply because Holy Unction does not guarantee that a person who received it will necessarily be healed. Rather, one can say that Holy Unction makes the one who receives it participate in Christ's sufferings, renders his bodily illness salvific and healing, liberating him from spiritual illness and death.

According to the Church's teaching, God is able to transform everything evil into something good. In this particular case illness, which by itself is evil and a consequence of corruption, becomes for the human person a source of spiritual benefits. By means of it he participates in Christ's sufferings and is risen with Christ to a new life. There are many cases when illness brings people to death, compels them to change their life and to embark upon the path of repentance that leads to God.

MARRIAGE

The love that exists between a man and a woman is an important theme in many books of Scripture. The Book of Genesis, in particular, tells us of holy and pious couples, such as Abraham and Sarrah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel. A special blessing, bestowed on these couples by the Lord, was made manifest in the multiplication of their descendants. Love is praised in the Song of Songs, a book which, in spite of all allegorical and mystical interpretations in patristic tradition, does not lose its literal meaning.

The very attitude of God to the people of Israel is compared in the Old Testament with that of a husband to his wife. This imagery is developed to such an extent that unfaithfulness to God and idolatry are paralleled with adultery and prostitution. When St Paul speaks about marital love as the reflection of the love which exists between Christ and the Church (cf. Eph.5:20-33), he develops the same imagery.

The mystery of marriage was established by God in Paradise. Having created Adam and Eve, God said to them: 'Be fruitful and multiply' (Gen.1:28). This multiplication of the human race was to be achieved through marriage: 'Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh' (Gen.2:24). Marital union is therefore not a consequence of the Fall but something inherent to the primordial nature of human beings. The mystery of marriage was further blessed by the Incarnate Lord when He changed water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. 'We state', St Cyril of Alexandria writes, 'that He (Christ) blessed marriage in accordance with the economy (oikonomia) by which He became man and went... to the wedding in Cana of Galilee'.

There are two misunderstandings about marriage which should be rejected in Orthodox dogmatic theology. One is that marriage exists for the sole purpose of procreation. What, then, is the meaning of marriage for those couples who have no children? Are they advised to divorce and remarry? Even in the case of those who have children: are they actually supposed to have relations once a year for the sole purpose of 'procreation'? This has never been a teaching of the Church. On the contrary, according to St John Chrysostom, among the two reasons for which marriage was instituted, namely 'to bring man to be content with one woman and to have children', it is the first reason which is the most important: 'as for procreation, it is not required absolutely by marriage...' In fact, in Orthodox understanding, the goal of marriage is that man and woman should become one, in the image of the Holy Trinity, Whose three Persons are essentially united in love. To quote St John Chrysostom again, 'when husband and wife are united in marriage, they are no longer seen as something earthly, but as the image of God Himself'. The mutual love of the two partners in marriage becomes life-giving and creative when a child is born as its fruit. Every human being is therefore to be a fruit of love, and everyone's birth is a result of love between his parents.

Another misunderstanding about marriage is that it should be regarded as a 'concession' to human 'infirmity': it is better to be married than to commit adultery (this understanding is based on a wrong interpretation of 1 Cor.7:2-9). Some early Christian sectarian movements (such as Montanism and Manicheanism) held the view that

sexualilty in general is something that is unclean and evil, while virginity is the only proper state for Christians. The Orthodox tradition opposed this distortion of Christian asceticism and morality very strongly.

In the Orthodox Church, there is no understanding of sexual union as something unclean or unholy. This becomes clear when one reads the following prayers from the Orthodox rite of Marriage: 'Bless their marriage, and vouchsafe unto these Thy servants... chastity, mutual love in the bond of peace... Preserve their bed unassailed... Cause their marriage to be honourable. Preserve their bed blameless. Mercifully grant that they may live together in purity...' Sexual life is therefore considered compatible with 'purity' and 'chastity', the latter being, of course, not an abstinence from intercourse but rather a sexual life that is liberated from what became its characteristic after the fall of Adam. As Paul Evdokimov says, 'in harmonious unions... sexuality undergoes a progressive spiritualization in order to reach conjugal chastity'. The mutual love of man and woman in marriage becomes less and less dependent on sexual life and develops into a deep unity and union which integrates the whole of the human person: the two must become not only 'one flesh', but also one soul and one spirit. In Christian marriage, it is not selfish 'pleasure' or search for 'fun' which is the main driving force: it is rather a quest for mutual sacrifice, for readiness to take the partner's cross as one's own, to share one's whole life with one's partner. The ultimate goal of marriage is the same as that of every other sacrament, deification of the human nature and union with Christ. This becomes possible only when marriage itself is transfigured and deified.

In marriage, the human person is transfigured; he overcomes his loneliness and egocentricism; his personality is completed and perfected. In this light Fr Alexander Elchaninov, a notable contemporary Orthodox priest and theologian, describes marriage in terms of 'initiation' and 'mystery', in which 'a full transformation of the human person' takes place, 'the enlargement of his personality, new eyes, new perception of life, birth into the world, by means of it, in new fulness'. In the marital union of two individuals there is both the completion of their personalities and the appearance of the fruit of their love, a child, who makes their dyad into a triad: '...An integral knowledge of another person is possible in marriage, a miracle of sensation, intimacy, of the vision of another person... Before marriage, the human person glides above life, seeing it from outside. Only in marriage is he fully immersed into it, and enters it through another person. This enjoyment of true knowledge and true life gives us that feeling of complete fulness and satisfaction which renders us richer and wiser. And this fulness is even deepened when out of the two of us, united and reconciled, a third appears, our child'.

Christ is the One Who is present at every Christian marriage and Who conducts the marriage ceremony in the Church: the priest's role is not even to represent, but rather to present Christ and to reveal His presence, as it is also in other sacraments. The story of the wedding in Cana of Galilee is read at the Christian wedding ceremony in order to show that marriage is the miracle of the transformation of water into wine, that is, of daily routine into an unceasing and everyday feast, a perpetual celebration of the love of one person for the other.

PRIESTHOOD

The sacrament of Priesthood includes three liturgical rites of ordination: to the episcopate, to the priesthood and to the diaconate.

According to the present tradition of the Orthodox Church, bishops are chosen from among the monks. In the early Church there were married bishops: St Paul says a bishop must be ‘the husband of one wife’ (1 Tim.3;2). However, even in the early centuries, preference was given to monastic or celibate clergy. Thus among the holy bishops of the fourth century only St Gregory of Nyssa was married, while St Athanasius, St Basil the Great, St Gregory the Theologian, and St John Chrysostom were celibate. Priests and deacons in the Orthodox Church can be either monastic or married. However, marriage is possible for clergy only before ordination and only once: those married a second time are not allowed to become priests or deacons.

The ordination into hierarchical ranks has from the apostolic times onwards been accomplished through the laying of hands (Greek cheirotonia). According to the Church’s rules, a priest and a deacon must be ordained by one bishop; a bishop, by several bishops (no less than three or two). Ordinations take place during the Liturgy. A bishop is ordained after the singing of ‘Holy God’ (during the Liturgy of the catechumens); a priest, after the Cherubic Hymn; and a deacon, after the consecration of the Holy Gifts.

Episcopal ordination are especially solemn. A priest who is to be ordained bishop enters the altar through the ‘royal doors’ and goes three times around the holy table, kissing its four corners; the clergy and the choir sing the troparia from the rite of Marriage. The one being ordained then bends his knees before the holy table, and the hierarchs lay their hands on his head, with the presiding celebrant reading the prayer of ordination: ‘The grace divine, which always healeth that which is infirm and completeth that which is wanting, through the laying-on of hands elevateth thee, the most God-loving Archimandrite, (name), duly elected, to be the Bishop of the God-saved cities, (names). Wherefore let us pray for him, that the grace of the All-holy Spirit may come upon him’. Following this, while Kyrie eleison (‘Lord, have mercy’) is sung by the clergy and the choir, the first hierarch reads other prayers. The newly-ordained bishop is then clothed in episcopal vestments, while the people (or the choir) exclaim Axios (‘He is worthy!’). This exclamation is the only trace of the ancient practice of the election of bishops by all the faithful.

Ordinations to the priesthood and to the diaconate follow the same order: the one who is being ordained enters the altar, goes around the holy table, kissing its corners, bends his knees (or only one knee, as in the case of a deacon); the bishop lays his hands and reads the prayers of consecration over the newly-ordained; and the latter is then clothed in his priestly (or diaconic) vestments with the Axios sung by people.

The singing of the troparia from the rite of Marriage has a special meaning in the ordination to the hierarchical ranks: it shows that the bishop (or priest, or deacon) is betrothed to his diocese (or parish). In the early Church it was very unusual either for a bishop to change his diocese, or for a priest, his parish. As a rule, an ecclesiastical appointment was for life. Even the Patriarch was chosen not from the bishops of a particular patriarchate, but from the lower clergy, in some cases even from the laity.

The Orthodox Church ascribes a very high significance to the sacrament of Priesthood, for with it the church community receives its new pastor. Despite everything

that has been written and said about the 'royal priesthood' of all believers, the Church also recognizes the difference between lay people and an ordained priest, the latter being entrusted with the celebration of the Eucharist, and having the power of 'binding and loosing'. Ordination into a hierarchical rank, be it of bishop, priest or deacon, is not only a change of status for someone, but also, to a certain extent, a transition to another level of existence.

In the Orthodox Church, priests and bishops are regarded as bearers of divine grace, as instruments through which God Himself acts. When receiving a priest's blessing, the faithful kiss his hand as if it were Christ's hand, because it is by Christ's power that he gives the blessing. This sense of holiness and dignity in priestly ministry is weakened in some Christian denominations. In certain Protestant communities the only difference between the laity and the clergy is that the latter have a 'licence to preach'.

MONASTICISM

In the Orthodox Church the rite of monastic tonsure has a sacramental character. It is called a 'sacrament' ('mystery') by Dionysius the Areopagite and other early Christian authors. It is also called a 'sacrament' in the rite itself. Like Baptism, it is death to fleshly life and a birth into a new, spiritual mode of existence. Like Chrismation, it is the seal and sign of being elected by God. Like Marriage, it is the betrothal with the Heavenly Bridegroom, Christ. Like Priesthood, it is a consecration for ministry to God. Like the Eucharist, it is union with Christ. As in Baptism, so in monastic tonsure the person receives a new name and has his sins forgiven. He rejects the sinful life and gives vows of faithfulness to Christ; he takes off a secular robe and puts on a new garment. Being born again, the person assumes infancy anew in order to attain 'to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ' (Eph.4:13).

The main goal of monasticism is the imitation of Christ whose way of life as described in the Gospel was altogether monastic. He was not married, was free from earthly bonds, had no roof over His head, travelled from place to place, lived in poverty, fasted, and spent nights in prayer. Monasticism is an attempt to come as close as possible to this ideal. It is the quest for sanctity, a search for God as the ultimate goal, the rejection of everything that binds one to earth and prevents one from ascending to heaven.

Monasticism is an unusual and exceptional way of life: not many are called to it. It is a life entirely and integrally given to God. The monastic renunciation of the world is not a hatred of the world's beauty or of the delights of life; it is rather renunciation of sins and passions, of fleshly desires and lusts, in short, of everything that entered human life after the Fall. The aim of monasticism is a return to that primordial chastity and sinlessness which Adam and Eve possessed in Paradise. The church Fathers called monasticism 'a life according to the Gospel' and 'a true philosophy'. As philosophers sought perfection along the paths of intellectual knowledge, so monks pursue perfection along the paths of ascetical struggle in imitation of Christ.

The entire philosophy of monasticism is expressed in the following words of Christ: 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me' (Matt.19:21); 'If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever

will save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it' (Matt.16:24-25); 'He who loves father and mother more than Me is not worthy of Me' (Matt.10:37). Monasticism is for those who want to be perfect, to follow Christ and to give their life for Him, to sell everything in order to have heavenly treasure. Like a merchant who goes and sells all his possessions in order to buy a pearl, a monk is ready to deny everything in the world in order to acquire Christ. Monasticism was a part of the Church's life from very early times, but it came to the force in the fourth century, when persecutions ceased. While during the first three centuries all adherents to Christianity were potential martyrs, in the fourth century the new faith virtually became the state religion of the Roman Empire. Now the quest for martyrdom and sacrifice led people into deep deserts, where ascetics created their 'state within the state'. The deserts of Egypt, Syria and Palestine, once fruitless and lifeless, were watered and populated by monks.

These are three basic vows taken by the monastics: obedience, poverty and chastity.

Obedience is a deliberate denial of self-will before God, before the abbot (hegumen) and before every member of the community. The Greek word hypakoe ('obedience') literally means 'hearing', 'listening'. Monastic obedience is hearing what God wants to tell a monk, listening to His will. Humans suffer greatly from their inability to follow God's will and to accept the world around them as it is. People always tend to think of the circumstances of their lives as less than desirable, and of those close to them as less than perfect. They want to change the world around them but, unable to do so, they find no rest, no peace. A monk, on the contrary, teaches himself to accept everything as it is and to receive from the hand of God with the same joy and thanksgiving both consolation and sufferings, health and illness, fortune and misfortune. With this attitude the monk obtains an inner, undisturbed peace that no external circumstances can spoil.

Poverty is a deliberate rejection of every earthly possession. This does not necessarily mean that a monk is totally deprived of all material things: it means that he must not be attached to anything earthly. Having inwardly rejected material wealth, he attains that spiritual freedom which is higher than any earthly possession.

The word 'chastity' is used in English to render the Greek sophrosyne, which literally means 'wisdom', 'integrity'. Chastity is not synonymous with celibacy: in monasticism the latter is only an element of the former. Chastity as wisdom and integrity, as life according to the Gospel and abstinence from passions and lusts, is also necessary in marriage. To live in chastity means to have one's entire life oriented to God, to check every thought, word and deed against the Gospel's standards.

As far as celibacy is concerned, in the context of monastic life it is a supra-natural form of existence. Loneliness is incompleteness, a deficiency: in marriage it is overcome through a common life with one's spouce. Monastics are espoused to God Himself. Monasticism is therefore not the opposite of marriage. Rather, it is also a kind of marital union, but not between two human beings: it is a union of the human person with God. Love is found at the very heart of both marriage and monasticism, but the object of love is different. A person cannot become a monk unless his love for God is so deep and ardent that he does not want to direct it to anyone but Him.

Monastic tonsure takes place in the church: it is normally conducted by a bishop or an abbot. The one to be tonsured takes off all his civil clothes, puts on a long white robe and stands before the abbot. Upon making his monastic vows he listens to the

abbot's exhortations, after which he receives a new name, is tonsured, and clothed in black monastic vestments. When the rite has finished, each member of the community comes to him, asking: 'What is your name, brother?' The newly-tonsured monk, according to tradition, spends several nights in the church reading the Psalter or the Gospel.

Monasticism is an inner and hidden life. It is absolute and the most radical expression of Christianity as a 'narrow way' leading to the Kingdom of heaven. Monastic detachment and concentration into oneself, however, does not imply egoism or the absence of love for one's neighbour. Being outside of worldly vanity, a monk does not forget his fellow humans, but in the silence of his cell prays for them.

The church Fathers understood that the transfiguration of the world and people's happiness depend not so much on external circumstances but on people's inner condition. True renovation of the world is only possible in the realm of spiritual life. Thus, neither Christ, nor the apostles nor the church Fathers demanded social changes; rather, all of them called for the inner spiritual transformation of each particular human being. Monks do not attempt to make the world better. They try to make themselves better in order that the world might be transformed from within. 'Save yourself, and thousands around you will be saved', says St Seraphim of Sarov. These words reflect the ultimate goal of monasticism and of Christianity in general. Needless to say, monasticism is not the only way of 'saving oneself', not even the best or the most convenient way. It is one of the ways, like marriage or priesthood, which may lead one to salvation and deification, if one continues along this path to the end.